

Year B, 20th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)

October 10, 2021

The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

One of the commentators I appreciate warns that this is one of those passages in Scripture that quits preaching and goes right to meddling in all our lives.

There is really no way to sugar coat this teaching of Jesus. He is talking about wealth, nothing metaphorical here. Jesus is talking about having too much wealth, and how having too much of it prevents us from inheriting eternal life. This is not about getting into heaven, Jesus is not saying that rich people go to hell. He is saying, though, that the rich are *highly* unlikely to “enter the kingdom of God.” That is about justification, about being in right relationship with God, not heaven and hell. Still, ouch. This is a lesson given in Love, mind you, but even in love it is destined if not designed to make us uncomfortable.

This passage isn’t preached directly very often because, well, who wants to hear that on a Sunday morning? Gone are the days when a good exhortation from the pulpit put a righteous spring in our steps. And this isn’t even a pulpit exhortation, this is the lectionary. These are the words of Jesus Christ, to you, this morning. (Now another commentator I reference made an off-hand comment that no one in mainline protestant denominations ever consider themselves rich. Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, now *they* are rich. We, we’re comfortable, perhaps, fortunate, prosperous, but never rich. *Rich* is a vulgar term, unseemly).

Well, let’s clear that one up. You all pay me \$81,000 a year, that is about 20% above the median household income in the US. Windy just started working, it is part time and we don’t know what the annual income will work out to be, but it will be noticeable to us. (By the way, we pledged \$4200 this year, about 5%, and over the next few years we will work towards a full 10% tithe. I had a colleague who always announced his pledge because he had a few folks that always made sure to pledge more than the pastor, because, well, just because. It is the last day of our pledge drive in case you haven’t pledged yet, or if you have and wanted to consider adjusting it so you could surpass the rector, because, well, just because). By American standards, we are not rich, we are decidedly in the middle. All that stimulus stuff this past year really helped us. But, if we

look beyond the borders, the global median household income is under \$10,000, (\$9,700 by one quick google search. It was \$3,200 in India and \$6200 in China this year). Of course a rupee goes a lot further in rural Bangalore than a dollar does in Brooklin either with an *i* or *y*, but by the sheer volume of wealth at our disposal, virtually every one of us in this room would be considered rich by most people in the world. We all are compared to Jesus, even adjusted for inflation over 2000 years.

Is that enough talk about wealth to make most of us at least a bit uncomfortable? Well, as Harry Potter would say, “Mischief managed!” That is exactly what Jesus was shooting for, making that young man squirm, but not for squirmings sake. Remember, right before he told him to sell everything he had and give it to the poor, the line is, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said...” His teaching here is not punishment for one who hoarded wealth at the expense of the poor, no, not at all, it is out of love for the one bearing the burden of wealth, the one entrapped by the allure of wealth, the drive to accumulate wealth, the need to protect and defend wealth and, of course, use wealth. And all of this He said for that rich young man’s own sake. (Sure the poor would benefit, too, but they would benefit by the sacrifice that benefited the young man. That’s a lot of benefits, everyone benefits because for God all things are possible).

Jesus’ loving concern for the young man was that something, in this case wealth, was getting between him and God. His wealth served as a barrier to right relationship with God. That is the spiritual teaching here. This is not an inditement of the wealthy as enemies of humanity. Remember, Jesus’ ministry was buoyed by those with wealth. Joseph of Arimathea used his considerable resources to buy the tomb for Jesus. Many of the early churches gathered in the homes of rich women. This parish exists in its current form, we have this beautiful building, placed on this lovely piece of land in this gorgeous place, you have a full time priest because people with means have shared their means. Thank you! And, of course, plenty of wealth is used sinfully, used to exert sinfully disproportionate influence and sinfully consume disproportionately beyond the means of the planet. And of course a lot of wealth is accumulated sinfully, that is to the detriment of others and out of alignment with God’s will. Today’s lesson, though, is about the damage that it does to the owners of wealth.

I’ve got plenty of things in my life that serve as barriers to a right relationship with God. I won’t go into the gory details, but money hasn’t been one of them. It is tight sometimes; we have a

bit extra at others, but we always have enough for what we need, and we don't really want much beyond that, fortunately, because want, desire are powerful and, when unrequited, deeply unpleasant, even dangerous feelings that can lead to very poor decision making and reckless risk taking. I grew up with enough privilege that money was never much of a concern as far as I knew, though my parents were surely relieved when I got a full ride Naval ROTC scholarship to a very expensive school... In any case, whether money was a concern or not, it was certainly never spoken of.

But that *concern* is what Jesus is getting at here in this profound lesson. The great theologian Paul Tillich puts it most clearly and succinctly when he defined God as our Ultimate Concern. Whatever concerns you ultimately, whatever you consider to be most important, whatever you spend the most time on, that you dedicate the most energy to, put your best self into, that is what will become your God. Let that notion sink in.

Concerns that rise to the level of barriers between us and God are certainly not limited to wealth, plenty of things get in the way of us being in union with God. Substances such alcohol, cannabis, pills being used beyond the scope of the label. Things we do, sex, gambling, food, (the pleasures of the table for pleasure's sake as well as the body dysmorphia around eating disorders), careerism, striving for success, status in society, achievement, competition, anything that can make us singular in our focus about anything but God has the potential to steer us wrong, to take our eyes off the prize that Jesus lays before our feet. Now those are some countercultural values! Singularity of purpose is *not* a Christian virtue unless the singularity consuming you is God in Christ with the Holy Spirit and loving our neighbors as ourselves. So many, many things can distract us from what is truly important, but don't skip over the wealth part because it makes you feel uncomfortable or judged. I'm not saying these things, Jesus is. Take it up with Him. Like really. How does the hymn go, "Are we weak and heavy-laden,/Cumbered with a load of care?/Precious Savior, still our refuge—/Take it to the Lord in prayer..." Yes, you do have a friend in Jesus.

So what do we do with all of this? In these moments I think about the things I cling to and I think, "Great, another self-improvement opportunity." What did Mark Twain say, "Quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world to do. I've done it at least a thousand times."

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews has words of consolation for us. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every

respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus Christ has been through everything – and knows everything and has compassion because of it. He knows everything about you and has suffered as you have suffered. He offers this teaching not in judgement or condemnation, but out of compassion, eternally offering both mercy and grace. The author of Hebrews continues, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” In the end, when it comes to Jesus Christ in our lives, it is all about mercy and grace.

We’ve been talking about these two divine gifts in our St. Julian of Norwich class. She wrote of mercy and grace, “These are two forms of action in one love. Mercy is the attribute of loving compassion that belongs to the tender Motherhood of God. Grace is the attribute of nobility that belongs to God’s royal nature and stems from that same love. Mercy works to protect, sustain, and bring life and healing. It springs from the tenderness of love. Grace works to build up and reward, endlessly transcending whatever we have earned through our loving and labor. It spreads far and wide, displaying the vast generosity and marvelous courtesy of our great God. This all flows from the abundance of love. Grace transforms our shame-filled failings into bountiful and never-ending solace. Grace lifts our terrifying falling into noble elevation. Grace converts our sorrowful dying into blessed, holy life.”

If we take this stuff seriously, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, the revelations of divine love made to saints of the church, we will realize that we have nothing to fear. Not even our greatest sins, our deepest failings in the eyes of God and humanity. You all know St. Julian’s great quote “..all well be well, and all will be well...” right? The full sentence from the mouth of Jesus in one of the visions or showings Julian had was, “Sin is inevitable, yet all will be well and all will be well and every kind of thing will be well.”

You don’t think God knows about you? What you do and fail to do? When you are naughty and when you are nice? What you gossip about in the parking lot after church or judge others about their vaccine status or political affiliation or how they use their resources? Of course God knows. Our nature is accounted for in the big scheme of things. And God in Christ loves you not in spite of those blemishes on our character, but because of them. As the author Barbara Kingsolver so wisely points out in her brilliant book *The Poisonwood Bible*, “We are our injuries as

much as our successes.” God knows this. Jesus lived this. The Holy Spirit sustains everyone, because we are all in the very same pickle.

So if wealth is your particular poison, you are far from alone. Or Pride. Gluttony. Lust. We all have our own special concern that takes our eyes off of loving God with *everything* we have and our neighbor as ourselves. So what to do? Besides taking it to the Lord in prayer, confession our sins, duly attempting to repent and return to the Lord, Julian offers an observation about the duties of our soul. Jesus revealed to her, “Two duties belong to our souls. One is to reverently marvel. The other is to humbly endure, always taking pleasure in God. He wants us to remember that life is short, and it won’t be long until we clearly see, within him, all that we desire. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder at the mercy and forgiveness I beheld in God.” Reverently marvel. Humbly endure. Mercy and forgiveness will follow. Now that is some religion that we can take to the bank. So to speak. AMEN.