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Sermon – Mark 10:17-31  
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

In ancient Israel, cities were surrounded by walls for protection, with a large gate at the front. The gates were not just a place where people came and went; they were a place for public assembly, location for the marketplace, where courts were held and more. It would be like putting the village, Island Trust and Coastal Community Credit Union and the churches all down in the ferry parking lot. During the day, the gates were open and it was a busy place. At night the gates are closed except for a small doorway within the larger door, called “the eye of the needle.” The image on the front of your bulletin illustrates the concept. At night there would have been a guard at this little door, which severely limits the speed at which people and stuff can pass through. The more things a visitor had with them, the more time and care it took for them to pass through the eye of the needle. If someone arrived by camel, they would have to unpack the camel and push their belongings through what may have been more of a passage than a doorway if it was made of thick stone blocks. Once the camel was unpacked, the visitor would have been able to lead the camel through – the eye of the needle was often curved on top, camel shaped to accommodate them. This whole process would take time and would make the visitor vulnerable as they pull apart their carefully packed belongings and rely on the honour of their hosts to make sure everything was safe during the process.

In this image, the more things one has, the more difficult and tedious it is to enter the city gate. The rich man in this morning’s gospel reading wonders, how can I enter the Kingdom of God – we should note that entering the Kingdom of God, receiving Eternal Life and being Saved all refer to the same thing. How does the rich man enter the Kingdom of God? Jesus, getting ready to leave town, gives him the standard answer, which is to follow the commandments Moses brought down Mount Sinai. The man affirms his commitment to what he has been taught and still wonders if he is doing enough. He

knows somewhere within him that there is something he carries that will not fit through the passage when he arrives in the middle of the night. He seeks the wisdom of this spiritual teacher. What is it and how can he leave it behind?

Jesus looks at him, loves him and really sees him. Jesus sees what is standing between him and God's kingdom. For the rich man, it is wealth and possessions. And we know this is the core barrier for him because he is shocked and grieved at Jesus' answer. If possessions were easy for him to give up, he might simply say thank you and go home to pack up his things. But he is not about to do that. Perhaps for him he keeps possessions because they are a status symbol; perhaps because they are a symbol of spiritual virtue; perhaps they are his identity and he doesn't know who he would be without them; perhaps they are family items passed down for generations; perhaps he worked really hard and gave up a lot to acquire them, so what would his life amount to if he let them go? Whatever the chord is that connects him to his possessions, as long as it is intact, he carries too much to make it through the passageway.

It is human and natural, healthy even as we grow, to become attached to things in this world, particularly things that bring security and meaning. As we find our grounding in the world, a tension grows between the attachments that keep us comfortable and the life we know in Christ. Jesus affirms this morning and through much of the gospels that life is to be had not by accumulating things or other securities, but by disencumbering ourselves.<sup>1</sup> By surrendering to Jesus little by little and receiving that much more of God's Kingdom. As we stand at the city gate, somewhere inside of us there is a place that knows the truth about the core attachment we just cannot give over to Jesus. The path is a vulnerability with ourselves, with God; the path is self-honesty; the path is trust in God's promise; the path is courage. On the other side of those things, we think we can't live without is a life so sweet we never can imagine it until we're there.

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, Interpretation: Mark p. 188

There's another piece to this that is interesting to me and pretty challenging, which is the bit about selling everything and giving the money to the poor. Jesus seems to imply a direct relationship between our commitment to our own security and our ability to help those in need; I've wondered this week if there is truth to that. It certainly rings true when we apply this image to the 1%. The capitalist greed in the world is outrageously out of hand – when CEO's are making billions and paying workers \$7.00 an hour. Those are some serious attachments. They are so out of touch that they don't have any concept what it looks like to live on that little. There's another level of vulnerability there to stand human being to human being and ask, what is your life like, and not look away from the answer. It's much harder for a billionaire CEO type to do this with their reinforced social armour.

It's entirely possible that when Jesus uses the camel through the eye of the needle metaphor, he isn't referring to the city gate, but in fact a real needle and camel. It's possible that he meant to offer an extreme image to communicate the magnitude of the impediment between some people and God's kingdom. The CEO's for instance . . . is the camel going through that needle? I mean, the camel might get a whisker through.

The disciples are listening to this and becoming increasingly agitated. They recognize everyone has attachments; everyone wants possessions. Seriously . . . can anyone enter God's kingdom? And we gave up everything, every security: our homes, families, communities, to follow . . . can we even enter God's Kingdom? Jesus has said to his disciples before, and reminds them here: since you left your family to dedicate your lives to God's Kingdom, you have inherited the family of God, the body of Christ. I was chatting with someone here on the island last week who said, it's a huge value for him that the majority of his friends are non-Christians. I asked jokingly if he stops being their friend if they become Christian. He laughed and then lit up with a response: "When they become Christian they become family!" Touché, my brother!

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a

hundredfold now in this age--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions--and in the age to come eternal life.”

Who can stand at the gates of the city, completely free and prepared to leave everything behind? Jesus says, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” What is that thing that you cannot live without? For God all things are possible. God walks with us on this lifelong journey of coming ever closer to the Kingdom . . . when we bring questions to God, we receive help: God, why is this important to me, what motivates me to want it, and it is amazing to see what happens just from the learning. It is a life-long journey, preparing to go through that passageway; it’s not something that happens all at once. We get glimpses and experiences of it along the way that give us just a taste of what it will be like when the Kingdom comes into its fullness. With every offering of surrender and every glimpse into that life, let us give thanks for our God in whom all things are possible.