

Seven years ago this month I was at an extended conference/retreat for a fairly narrow cohort of 32 Episcopal priests of similar age and tenure. Our time together involved focusing on clergy wellness in a number of aspects of priestly ministry: vocation, prayer, spirituality, finances, and health.

During one of our sessions, one of the leaders asked us to write down on two different index cards the two things, besides God, that we treasured most in life.

After thinking about it, I wrote down my family on one card, and being a priest on the other card. After God, those are the two things I value most.

Then the leader asked the next question. "If God asked you to choose one of those two things to give up, which would it be?" And then to drive the point home, we had to give her one of our two cards.

She then made the circuit of the room and collected one card from each of us. I kept the card that said, "My family" and gave her the card that said, "My priesthood." But I'll tell you it was a tough, gut-wrenching thing to hand that card over, even though it was just a paper exercise. It reminded me how much I take the important things in my life for granted, and how hard it is to even think about giving up one of them.

Then our leader shuffled the cards and read the 32 things that the 32 priests in the room treasured 3rd best, after God, and after whatever was written on the other card. Turns out there were a number of "my family" and "my ministry as a priest" responses, as well as others.

What was also interesting is that none of the 32 priests listed anything to do with money. Remember, this was a conference where a significant part of the time was spent on financial wellness. We were talking about financial planning, and paying down debt, and making sure to have enough savings for retirement. And yet, money and possessions didn't make the cut when we wrote down the most important things in our lives.

"Ah," you might say, "You're all priests. Of course money is not the most important thing in your lives." Maybe so. I don't know.

But I would guess that if you really thought about it, most everyone in this room would not regard money as THE most important thing in life. I think back to 9/11 twenty years ago. When those people called home for the last time, they weren't worried about their money or their possessions. They were concerned with loving relationships. The other things in life paled in comparison.

And yet, and yet, how much of your time, how much of your mental energy, how many of your daydreams center on money and stuff? How much of your life do you use in the pursuit of earning or keeping your money? How much of your life is wrapped up in getting or keeping your stuff? How much time do you spend worrying about your work, or about your portfolio, or your bills, or about the balance in your check book?

I think we know at some level that money is not the most important thing. But we often forget that when we're living our lives.

In our Gospel lesson today from Mark, a rich man comes up to Jesus. Matthew describes him as young,<sup>1</sup> and Luke says that he is part of the aristocracy.<sup>2</sup> So this man is sometimes given a title which is a composite of all 3 of these Gospels, and he gets referred to as the "rich young ruler."

In chapter 10 of Mark, this rich man runs up to Jesus and kneels before him. Running is a sign that he is excited. Kneeling is a sign of tremendous respect.

He says, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"<sup>3</sup>

Eternal life is God's life. It's being connected with God.

Jesus gives him the obvious answer. You want to be in relationship with God? Then do what God says to do. Obey the 10 Commandments. Don't murder or commit adultery or steal, etc., etc.

The young man says, "Teacher, I have kept all these (commandments) since my youth."<sup>4</sup> 'I've done everything I'm supposed to. I've dotted my 'i's and crossed my 't's.'

But then Jesus gives him an answer he's not ready for. This is a spiritual punch in the gut. We're told point blank that Jesus felt love for the man. So what Jesus says is said in love: 'You want eternal life? You really want to be doing what God would have you do? Well, there's just one thing you're missing.'

Jesus says, "go, sell everything you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is basically telling the rich young ruler, 'Your stuff is getting in the way of your relationship with God. So get rid of it. Trust in God. And give away the stuff you don't need.'

But we're told that the man goes away sad and in grief because he just can't do it. He just can't part with all the possessions he's accumulated.

If he had had two index cards, one with "following God" and one with "keeping my stuff," he would have kept the stuff card and given up the God card.

The rich man's earthly treasure is more important to him than the heavenly treasure Jesus promises. And so he goes away, shocked and grieving.

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 19:22

<sup>2</sup> Lk 18:18

<sup>3</sup> Mk 10:17

<sup>4</sup> Mk 10:20

<sup>5</sup> Mk 10:21

And so, Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"<sup>6</sup>

And remember folks, that's us too. Even the poorest American is very wealthy compared to most people in the world.

"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God."

And then the really tough words, "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."<sup>7</sup>

Ouch. That's tough stuff. In fact, that's extremely tough stuff.

And because it's so tough, people have tried to soften the impact of what Jesus is saying. Over the years, there are two ways people have tried to explain away this saying. Both of these supposed "explanations" are biblically incorrect, but you might have heard one or both of them.

One is that the words for camel and rope are only different by one letter in Greek, and that maybe Jesus was talking about threading a string or rope through a needle, not a camel. That's true grammatically, but makes no sense in the context of the story.

Two is the "urban legend" that there used to be a small gate in Jerusalem which was nicknamed 'the eye of the needle,' which you could barely squeeze one camel through. Nice thought, but there's no record anywhere of such a gate.

Both explanations are unfounded. Jesus is really talking about a huge camel and the eye of a tiny needle.

And if you're trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle, there's not an engineering solution to this one. It doesn't matter how much the camel slobbers, or how much WD40 you spray on the needle, or how much Crisco you put on the camel's body, or what his initial velocity and trajectory are. 'Maybe if we grease everything up and get a running start...'  
No. You just can't do it. It's impossible to pass a camel through the eye of a needle. That's the whole point

Our stuff, our wealth, our money can have a powerful spiritual choke hold on us, and we can't break ourselves out of it.

And the disciples get the point. They ask, "Who then can be saved?"<sup>8</sup>

Jesus answers, "For people it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."<sup>9</sup> And that's the good news. We can't do it. But God can do it for us.

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<sup>6</sup> Mk 10:23

<sup>7</sup> Mk 10:25

<sup>8</sup> Mk 10:26

God can help us get our priorities straight. God can help us get our priorities in perspective.

And that's so important when it comes to our money, our jobs, or stuff. All those things are important. But none of them are all-important. As the saying goes, money can be a great servant, but it's a horrible master.

And God's prescription for our money, over and over again, is to give some of it away. A few people are called by God to give all their money away. But all of us are called to give at least some of our money away.

That's God's very tough but very necessary prescription. The only way to get our money and possessions in perspective is to be willing to share, at least in part.

Christian stewardship is a reminder that money is a means to an end, but not an end in itself. Money can help us support ourselves and our loved ones. But we are also called to use our money to do God's work in the world. We are also called to help those less fortunate than ourselves. And that's a whole bunch of people.

Ask yourself, "What are the most important things in my life?" Is it my family? My faith? My friends? My community? My world?

And then ask yourself, how can I use my money to serve those ends? How can my spending reflect what I care about the most."

Think about it. Think about it.