

18 October 2009
Pentecost 20

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The God Who Loves Us”

Text: Mark 10:23-31 (Ecclesiastes 5:10-20; Hebrews 4:1-16)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Holy Gospel last week, we heard of a rich young man who had come to Jesus full of excitement and hope. He wanted to enter the kingdom of God and he was willing to do whatever it took to do so . . . except for one thing: he would not let go of his wealth. He could not. And so he went away, filled with sorrow.

Today, we hear Jesus’ response, and we hear that this rich young man was not the only one filled with sorrow: *Jesus was too*. Can you hear the sorrow in His voice, as watching the eager young man turn around and walk away from Him, Jesus sighs, and with a heavy heart and perhaps with eyes still focused on the young man walking away, says to His disciples: **“How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”**

The disciples were amazed at his words. Perhaps because they thought that those God has so richly blessed would be those most thankful to Him! But it is often not that way, is it? Gifts become gods, and what has been given becomes more important than the One who gives it. So important that we will not let go of it . . . or maybe even *cannot*, because we cannot imagine life without it. And while that is a danger with *all* the things that God has given us in this world and life (or that we *want* Him to give us!), Jesus would have you know today that it is a particular danger with wealth, with money, with stuff.

And whether you live in first century Israel or 21st century America or any other time, it doesn’t take long to see how true that is. How, like the rich young man, our wealth makes us sorrowful, not joyful. Consider Solomon, who wrote the Old Testament reading today from Ecclesiastes. If anybody had it made, it was him! His riches, his kingdom, his wisdom - he had it all . . . and yet he was miserable, sorrowful. These things had become his gods, **and while he loved them, they did not love him back.** And the more he loved them, the emptier he became, the more loveless he became, and the more hopeless and vain it all seemed.

This is a pattern that repeats itself far too often. And it doesn’t matter who you are or where you’re from. We think: “If I can just have *this*, then I’ll be good.” But *this*

always leads to *that*. It is why so many credit cards are maxed out. It is why so many homes are being foreclosed. It is why so many families are being destroyed. It is why so many who have so much have so little joy and contentment. **We love what we have, but what we have doesn't love us.** And so we search and we cling and we work and we hope . . . and what gives us value and worth one day seems so empty and hollow the next. And we do not find what we were looking for. We find not love, but sorrow. We find gods who take but do not give back.

That's why in the verses of the Holy Gospel we heard last week, there was a little comment in the middle of the reading that seemed just kind of thrown in at the time, but which turns out to be so important. We were told this: ***"And Jesus, looking at him, loved him."***

That's the crux of it all right there. That right before the rich young man was someone giving him what he needed and wanted and craved. It is the difference between all false gods and the one true God: **there is only One who loves you.** All other gods take; the one true God gives. All other gods leave you empty; the one true God fills you. All other gods give sorrow; the one true God gives life.

And so in love, our God did something much more difficult than put **a camel through the eye of a needle.** That sounds incredible to us, and so many commentators and teachers have tried to soften this teaching of Jesus by claiming that there was a gate into the city of Jerusalem that was named "the eye of the needle" and if your camel had too much stuff on it, you would have to take some off to get through. *But it was possible!* But let us move past such nonsense to the real point: *Jesus meant what He said.* Unless and until you can put your big, fat, sinful, camel-self through the eye of a needle, you will never get yourself into the kingdom of heaven. The disciples understood that, that's why they immediately asked: ***"Then who can be saved?"***

And Jesus says: ***"All things are possible with God."*** Because what had God done? He didn't put a camel through the eye of a needle, He did something much, much *greater: in love, He put His almighty and infinite Son through a virgin's womb.* That His Son, clothed in our flesh and blood, love us to death. That we who are dead in our trespasses and sins and clinging to our false gods, be loved to life. And so Jesus comes to give us what no one and no thing else can: love. True love. Eternal love.

And so in love He is born, and in love He lives. In love He ascends the cross, and in love He dies. In love He takes our sins, and in love He gives us forgiveness and life. For as it was said of the rich young man, so it is true for you: ***And Jesus, looking at you, loves you.*** Not because you deserve it, but because that is who your God and Saviour is and what He does: love.

Today you got to see that love in action yet again, as the almighty and infinite Son of God came through the waters of Holy Baptism, and again did something *much greater than put a camel through the eye of a needle* - He put YuRim through His death and resurrection and gave her the promise of eternal life. He washed away her sins and gave her a new birth and made her His child forever. Not because water can do such great things, but because He can.

And in just a few moments, you get to see this love in action again, as the almighty and infinite Son of God come to you in the bread and wine of His Supper, doing something *much greater than putting a camel through the eye of a needle* - putting His body into your mouth and pouring His blood over your sin-parched lips, thus giving life to the dead, forgiveness to the sinful, and salvation to the needy. Not because bread and wine can do such great things, but because He can.

He can, and in love, He does. That you not walk away from Him in sorrow. In fact, that you not walk away from Him at all, for from this place He goes with you. For here He gives you the greatest gift of all: *the gift of Himself*, to be with you always. That we may cling not to the things of this world, but to Him. To Him who ***has been tempted as you are tempted, who can sympathize with you in your weakness***, and who - unlike the things of this world - will never pass away. That at all times and each day we have the mercy and grace we need. For whatever struggle you have, for whatever problem you face, for whatever demon comes your way.

Those things of life are hard when they come upon us, and it's hard to cling to your Saviour through them when the world seems to offer such easy alternatives and solutions. And so seduced, many walk away from Christ, clinging to false hope, false promises, and false gods. And so Jesus gives you this promise today, that ***“there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.”*** Three promises, actually, that Jesus gives you there: the promise of the church as your family; the promise of persecutions from your enemy, the devil; and the promise of eternal life.

And with those promises, do you see? You and I are very rich young men and women indeed. Not, perhaps, rich in the things of this world, but rich with the kingdom of God. And those are the riches Satan wants! The riches of this world he knows are rubbish - he doesn't care about them. That's why he persecutes you. To try to take away from you what you have that he can never have: the kingdom of God. But to you, dear children of God - to you and not to him - has been given the kingdom of God. For you the Son of God has come. For you He lived and died and

lives again. For you - that you who are last in the eyes of the world might be first in His sight. In His sight - the one who looks at you and loves you. And when you have that - when you have Him - you have all that you need. And though you lose everything in this world and life, you are rich - very rich indeed!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.