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Pentecost 22

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Children of the One Who Loves to Give”

Text: Mark 10:23-31 (Ecclesiastes 5:10-20; Hebrews 4:1-13)

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

I wonder how far the rich young man had gotten? You know, the one we heard about last week. Who wouldn't - couldn't - give up his wealth to follow Jesus. He wanted eternal life, but not at that price. It would cost him too much. And so he went away sorrowful and disheartened. He turned around and walked away from Jesus.

How far had he gotten? A couple of paces, a hundred yards? Before Jesus, maybe still looking at him, still gazing at him walking away, maybe still hoping he would turn around . . . for, we heard last week, Jesus loved him . . . How far had he gotten before Jesus said the words we hear today: ***How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!***

The disciples are amazed at His words. Not just these words, but everything that Jesus had said to this rich young man. It is a high price for eternal life. It costs everything you have. *Sell all you have*. Not just a tithe, not even half - all of it. You can understand why the disciples were so amazed.

And then Jesus doubles down. He seems to do that a lot. Once He says something that causes amazement, He ups the ante - makes it even more amazing. ***Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!*** Not just for those who have wealth anymore, now a general statement. But for those who have wealth, this too: ***It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.***

Some people in recent years have tried to soften up that saying a bit; make it a little less impossible; a bit more palatable. Saying that “the eye of a needle” was the name of one of the narrow gates into Jerusalem, and so a rich person with a camel loaded with stuff would have to unload the riches off his camel in order to get through that gate. But the disciples knew what Jesus was saying. And it wasn't that. Because now they are not just astonished but ***exceedingly astonished***, and so ask: ***Then who can be saved?*** We can't even get a lousy piece of thread through the eye of a needle most of the time! And notice, too - they don't just ask how *the rich* can be saved, but *anyone*. Sell all you have? A camel through the eye of a needle? ***How can anyone be saved?***

It's the right question. Although not one many today are asking. For today, in our STEM world - our **Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math** world - we'll figure it out. If we can put a man on the moon, a computer in every pocket, and an internet that takes information around the world in milliseconds, then we'll engineer a camel small enough, or manufacture a needle big enough, or do whatever else we need to do! Because we're smart. We're able. To meet any challenge. Overcome any obstacle. Defeat any foe. Nothing is impossible for us.

But do you see? That's walking away from Jesus too, isn't it? That's not following Him, but turning to what we can do. But what Jesus said then is just as true today: ***With man it is impossible***. We can do a great many things, but one thing we cannot do and will not ever be able to do: **the kingdom of God**. On our own we cannot find it. On our own we cannot achieve it. On our own we cannot enter it. It might as well be at the other end of the universe, of space, of all there is. We'll never get there on our own. No amount of good works, no amount of ingenuity, no amount of time, will ever be enough. ***With man it is impossible***.

Oh, I'm preaching to the choir, aren't I? You know this, right? Like Peter knew it. And yet on hearing these words says to Jesus: ***See, we have left everything and followed you***. He sounds just like the rich young man last week, doesn't he? Who said: *All these I have done from my youth!* Today, it's Peter: *We've left everything and followed you!* And we hear the words, we know they're true, and yet still our hearts want there to be something in us, too! Or something not in us, so that we can say: I'm not like that. I'm not like them. Glad I'm not rich! Glad I'm not proud. Glad I'm in church every week, and give and pray and do good and . . . oh, wait.

Now, some of that is true for you, though you are rich. Maybe not compared to some, but compared to most. And you're generous. You give to this church, you give to charities, you give to those in need, you give to students - and God loves it. He loves it so much that He promises that you cannot possibly out-give Him. The more you give, the more you leave, the more He is going to give. Even ***a hundredfold***, He says - a hundred times what you give.

Oh, Jesus says, and there will be ***persecutions***, too. It's not going to be easy. For the evil one will not like your generosity, your good, your prayers, and so tries to stop it. Turn you in on yourself. Make you resentful, suspicious, and reluctant to give. Turn you away from your Father in heaven. Though maybe the persecution will be sent by your Father, to test you. See if you'll keep giving, see if you'll keep gooding, even when times are tough. Or see if you're just a fair weather friend, a giving-as-long-as-there-is-plenty friend, or one who gives no matter what.

And then this too, Jesus says: You will not only receive in this life, but also will be given to you ***in the age to come, eternal life***. That, too, is a promise, part of that same you-

can't-out-give God fact. For even if you give your life, He will out-give you, and give you eternal life. That, too, like everything else you have in this world and life, a gift for you. A gift you cannot earn by your generosity, your good, your prayers, or anything you do or give up. It is a gift you can only receive. From the most gracious and generous Giver of all.

For when it comes to you and God, when it comes to your relationship with Him, there's one very important word Jesus used today that says it all: **children**. He calls His disciples children. He calls you children. And that is not a word Jesus uses lightly. It is a term of endearment. It is a term of commitment. Not like today in our world of baby mamas and deadbeat dads. When God calls you His child, when Jesus calls you His child, **you are**. With all that goes with that. And you are for He baptized you into His family, gave you the family name, and promised you the family inheritance. So He will care for you and feed you, just as He did for His children for 40 years in the wilderness when, as we heard from Hebrews today, He did when leading them to their rest. They got manna every day, water from a rock, and their clothes never wore out. He led them day and night, protected them from their foes, and even from themselves, when they rebelled and were disobedient.

And with all that they learned. The Promised Land wasn't something they were going to do; all their STEM wasn't going to get them in, get it done, or give them rest. **Impossible for man**. But their Father would give it to them. As He promised.

And as He has done ever since the beginning of creation. Because the truth is that God loves to give. He loves it when you give because you're being like Him. A child imitating their Father. And how much does God love to give? Look at Jesus and you'll see it. He loves to heal, He loves to feed, He loves to touch, He loves to teach, He loves to forgive, He loves to pay your debt, He loves to raise you from the dead, He even loves to die for you.

Wait - *what?* Yes, *He loves to die for you*. Because that's what love is. Not an ooey-goey gushy feeling in your heart, but giving yourself for the other. I'm sure Jesus didn't feel like going to the cross, enduring the agony and pain and nails and spear and humiliation and suffering and death that meant. But that's what love does. And He gave everything He had for you.

It may be impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but what Jesus did was even harder - when He went through death and the grave. He went to the cross with all your life-crushing sin and let death swallow Him up for it, **so that** He could swallow up death in His resurrection. That for you and I, death no longer be that impossible barrier, that eye of a needle that we cannot pass through. On our own, yes, **it is impossible. But not with God**. And so because Jesus went through what we cannot, dying but rising to life again, now too for you, as for Jesus, death is in the rear-view mirror.

You will die, but death and the grave is now - because of Jesus - just the passageway, the gate, to eternal life. His doing, His gift, for you.

Riches, wealth, is one of the most alluring false gods. Ask what people would give to win the Mega Millions lottery jackpot next week - now up to \$1.6 billion - you might be surprised at the answers you get; what people are willing to sacrifice for a pot of gold like that. And how many have sacrificed family and friends for the sake of money? How many fights have broken out over how to divide lottery winnings or inheritances? And how many have ship wrecked their faith because of this, too?

But you are a child of the one who loves to give. And while you may be last in the eyes of many in this world, you are first in His eyes - the only eyes that really matter.

For you are a child of the one who loves to give. Who does the providing. Who does the saving. So better to cling to Him who can repay a hundredfold - or more! - what we give, than to cling to what we have and not give. For as we heard from Ecclesiastes today: *what's the point of that - clinging to what you have? Loving your money?* You can't take it with you. And if that's all there is to life, and there's no life after this one, what a sad lot we have.

But as Jesus' resurrection proved, this life is not all there is. There is a rest still to come. An eternal one. A Promised Land for us, that our Lord will provide. He'll lead us there by day and by night, through good times and bad times, by His Word. We'll pass through the waters - not of the Red Sea - but of baptism, where our sins will be drowned, never to come back and accuse us. He'll give us the living water of His Spirit to refresh our faith and strengthen us when weary. And He'll feed us with His manna, His own Body and Blood, on the way. And with these riches - and they are riches, no matter what the world or our eyes may tell us - we truly have all that we need.

And we do because Jesus is the one who left everything for you. He was the first who became last, so that you may be first; so that you be a child of God. And there is nothing higher than that.

So rest in Him, even now. In His promises and goodness. And look forward to the rest still to come. And when you do, when you know that, when you have Jesus . . . the things of this world and life aren't so important any more. They become not things to love, but things to give in love. Not things to cling to, but things to let go of. Because you have the one who won't let go of you. The one who can put camels through eyes of needles, the one who can overcome death and the grave, and the one who has and will continue to give all He has **for you**.

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.