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Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Life on the Other Side of the Needle”

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.

“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.” And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, “Then who can be saved?”

I have trouble even getting a little piece of thread through the eye of a needle its *supposed* to go through! So a camel . . .

I googled it though. The average weight of a camel is around 1,000 pounds, it’s average height is seven feet, and the ones I’ve seen are about four foot wide. And the eye of your typical sewing needle is measured in millimeters.

So obviously, a camel isn’t getting through there.

But I say to you: *it can*.

But not the way some so-called scholars have tried to remake and re-interpret these words of Jesus. Maybe you’ve heard their argument: that there was a gate into Jerusalem called “The Eye of the Needle” and a camel heavy laden with goods wouldn’t be able to fit through it. One would have to unload the camel, take off all its cargo, before it could fit through. That’s what Jesus meant.

Uh, no.

If it was, the disciples would not have been so astonished at what Jesus said. And not just astonished, but *exceedingly* astonished! No, they would have nodded their heads in agreement. Of course! But they knew what Jesus was saying here. Just as we know what Jesus is saying here. It is impossible. Jesus even says that in response to the disciples’ question, ***Then who can be saved?*** He says, ***With man it is impossible*** . . .

But I still say to you: *it can*. A camel can get through the eye of a needle. It is possible.

Curious? I know, it’s dangerous to contradict Jesus. I’m on shaky ground here. But I

think I know how to do it . . .

Of course, it's not by pulling really hard. It's not by using grease to make the camel slip through. It's not finding a pygmy camel and a really large needle - see? No, it's by putting that camel through *one piece at a time*. Hair by hair, piece by piece. Skin, organs, hooves all cut up small enough to pass through. It would take a while. It would be pretty messy, pretty bloody, pretty gross. But I could do it.

There's only one problem: would I have a camel left after all that? Not really. Just a bunch a dead camel parts. Actually, not even that. *Shredded* camel. What would wind up on the other side of the needle is nothing like what started. Because the only way that camel is getting through that needle **is to die**.

Well, if that's *easier* . . . ***Then who can be saved?*** the disciples asked. Because Jesus said the same kind of thing about us, when He said: *Strive to enter through the narrow door* (Matthew 7:13). The eye of a needle qualifies. And you'll have just as much trouble as a camel. **So to get you through, you'll have to die, too?**

But that's not much good. What good is being saved if you're just a saved corpse? Then you're just like that dismembered camel - what winds up on the other side is nothing like what started.

Oh, but Jesus said that only about the rich! Well, you are. Compared to most of the rest of the world. So no out for you there.

So we're back to the question: to get you through, to enter the kingdom of God, **you'll have to die, too?**

Yes.

But we don't want to die. Death isn't natural. Death isn't what we were designed to do. Death is because of sin. God created us to live. So we try to live. We look for life. We look for life in all kinds of things in this world. And money, wealth, is one of those things. A very popular one. Money can get me what I want. Money will improve my life. Money will buy the best doctors. Money will fund the latest medical research. Money can get the best treatments. Money can make me live longer. And certainly happier, right? Happier than those who don't have it; than those panhandlers we see on all the street medians.

Well, Solomon thought so. Solomon who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, which we heard from today. *King* Solomon, who was far more wealthy than we will ever be. Solomon had it made . . . until he didn't. Until he realized that his wealth didn't give him, couldn't give him, what he wanted. He wasn't happy. The richer he got, the more miserable he got, the

more people became fake friends just to get his money. He lost sleep. He worked hard, but for all that, he didn't have the life he wanted. He was staring death in the face, and his wealth couldn't help him. He realized that *as he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.*

He realized: money, or wealth, makes a really lousy god. He called it *a grievous evil*.

Good choice of words. When your wealth becomes your god, that is anti-God, so it has become evil. And *a grievous evil* if it keeps you out of the kingdom of God.

But just like with the rich man last week, so too for us, the wealth of this world, the things of this world, are so hard to let go of. Whether that wealth is a wealth of the riches of the world, the admiration of the world, the popularity of the world, the power of the world, the acceptance of the world. Life is easier when you have those things, with the world on your side, and much harder if you don't. We see that happening today, when the world turns against people and what they believe.

Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! Jesus said. Difficult at the time of Jesus. Difficult for those early Christians who were persecuted and martyred. And difficult today. **Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle!**

So that brings us back to the question again: to get you through, to enter the kingdom of God, **you'll have to die, too?**

Yes.

And then your wealth can't help you, your friends can't help you, your power or whatever else you have can't help you. As Solomon said, that all gets left behind. When you die, there's only one who can help you: **the one who came and died with you. The one who came and died for you.** That He be that one on the other side of the needle's eye who could bring to life again. Who could raise that camel back to life. Who could raise you to life again. That you enter the kingdom of God *alive*. That you have hope.

So that's what Jesus came to do, and did. He wanted that rich man to follow Him to the cross and witness His death and resurrection, how he would inherit eternal life. And He wants you to do the same. To find your life not in anything in this world, not in anything that cannot give you life, but to find your life only in Him. In Him who died and rose to life again. In Him who promised the same for you.

So for you who must die, Jesus baptized you into His death and resurrection. To get your eye-threading death and other-side-of-the-needle resurrection over with. To give you life already here and now in the kingdom of God. That's how great baptism is. It gives you

everything you need - the forgiveness of your sins, eternal life, the kingdom of God - everything! Promise after promise after promise. Gift after gift after gift.

But you realize what we keep doing? In baptism, Jesus has brought us through the eye of the needle with Himself, through His death and into a new life in the kingdom of God . . . but what do we keep doing? **Reaching back through the needle for the things of this world!** Thank you Jesus, but I really need this. I really want that. I know what you said, but . . . Can't I just have this too? And maybe it's just one part of us that squeezes back through first, but then another, and another, until we've squeezed back through the needle to death in this world? That doesn't make any sense! And yet . . . do you see yourself reaching back, grasping, coveting . . . ?

So Jesus calls us to **repent**. That is, to **drop** whatever it is we've reached back through the needle for this week. To drop it here, to drop it at the altar, to drop it at the foot of the cross, and confess. Why did I do that? My life's here, not there. Forgive me. And Jesus pulls us back through the needle again. *I forgive you*, He says.

And then He holds out His Body and Blood and says: *here*. Reach for this instead. Reach for what gives you life, and strengthens you in this life. The food and drink of eternal life. Don't reach back, reach forward. Take and eat.

Live in this world but don't find your life in this world. Enjoy the things of this world but don't find your life or hope in them. *I am the way, the truth, and the life* (John 14:6). And I'll provide all you need, Jesus promises.

And that's what Jesus tells Peter. For Peter says: *See, we have left everything*, we dropped everything, *and followed you*. And they did. They really did. Peter, Andrew, James, and John all left their fishing business. Matthew left his tax collecting career. We're not told what the others left, but surely they did, too. They left family and friends - Peter had a mother-in-law that Jesus healed so we know he at least had a wife. Maybe a family. Maybe the others, too. And Jesus says in response: *whatever you've left, I'll give you more*. *But* it won't be easy. You'll have *persecutions*, too, here and now. From an evil one who hates you and a world that disagrees with you, trying to pull you back through the needle to their side, the side of death. They'll make it feel like, and they'll try to get you to think that *I'm* the one taking life away from you! But it is exactly the opposite. That's what *they're* doing. *I'm* giving you life. A life that will never end. **Life that only comes on the other side of the needle**. So don't listen to them. Don't follow them. Follow ME. To the cross, *through* the cross, to life again.

So as we heard in the Epistle from Hebrews: *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession*. That is, hold fast to Him, the one we confess, the one who made it through death, through the eye of the needle and rose to life again. Hold fast to Him and don't reach back

through the needle! *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are,* tempted to stay on this side of the needle, or tempted to reach back through the needle, *yet without sin.* Yet He didn't. He made it. For you. *Let us then with confidence* - in Him and what He has done - *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,* the grace offered here, drawing near in repentance, dropping all that we've reached for this week, *that we may receive* that we may grab hold of *mercy* that is, Jesus, *and find grace to help in time of need.* Grabbing hold of Jesus who has grabbed hold of you **and pulled you through the needle to eternal life.**

Impossible for you, but not only possible for Jesus, God made flesh, our great High Priest, but done. Accomplished. For you. *It is finished.* **So you have life on the other side of the needle.**

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.