

“A Twist of Faith”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Psalms 90:12-17  
Mark 10:17-31

A camel through the eye of a needle. The physics of that is pretty daunting. If you are rich, this passage that claims that it is more difficult for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle probably leaves you discouraged, if not grieving-- just as we found the man in the gospel passage at the end of today's story.

The odds are so great, impossible really. But for any of us with the interest of wanting more, we wonder what twist will help *us* get through that eye of the needle.

I recently watched the Netflix series Squid Game. The show comes from Korea, and its popularity has spread far beyond South Korea; globally, it is the top show in the history of Netflix. The basic premise of Squid Game is that a group of people who are drowning in debt are given a chance to compete to win a huge cash prize. Only one out of 456 contestants will win, and with each person eliminated, the cash prize gets larger. The competition has three rules: a player is not allowed to stop playing, a player who refuses to play will be eliminated, and games may be terminated if the majority agrees. After the first game, a Korean version of “Red Light, Green Light,” when about half the original group is killed, the surviving winners vote-- by a majority of one-- to end the competition. They all go back to their former lives. However, once they go back to that experience of anxiety and indignity of being buried in debt, they return to the competition and its impossible odds; the incredibly narrow chance of becoming rich-- even risking the very high likelihood of getting killed in the competition-- is much more appealing than living life among the poorest of the poor.

The show gives a critique at society, not only in Korea but in our global economy, casting a judgmental eye on an economic system that allows a very few people to get rich only at the suffering of others. It makes us examine ourselves and the kinds of things we will do to be among the wealthy, things that cause us to lose our heart and our humanity.

In our gospel text, we have someone who seemingly has all he needs, both materially and spiritually-- and yet, he reaches out to Jesus for something more. We find out that he is a wealthy man. The Roman empire during Jesus' time had a stratified system of wealth and class. Only about 2-3% of the population belonged to the wealthy elite, and about 80-90% lived in some level of poverty. “Wealth-- and status and power-- were conspicuously displayed in housing, furnishings, ownership of numerous slaves, clothing, food, entertainment... and public good works that secured public honor.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, Barbara E. Reid, editor, *Wisdom Commentary: Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019) p. 422.

We find out that he has done the basic criteria required by his Jewish faith to keep to the commandments-- or at least, he thinks he has: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' All but one of these are from the Ten Commandments-- the commandment "You shall not defraud" meaning you shouldn't cheat other people.

I grew up at a church with a lot of people like this man. No, they did not own slaves, but their ancestors did-- and truth be told, so did mine. The gleaming cars in the parking lot showed the wealth of the faithful there. I made the mistake, as many people trying to practice Christianity do, of believing that wealth was a sign of God's favor: that if you were faithful and did what God asks of you, then God would reward you with success, money, and an easy life.

And so, I was self-conscious of the dress shoes I wore to church that pinched my toes because they were much too small for my growing feet. I was especially ashamed when we lost our home after my mom struggled with long bouts of unemployment; that was a story which I couldn't even bring myself to tell anybody at my church. Somehow, I figured, we must have failed at faithfulness.

It was not until a few years later, when I started volunteering as an overnight host at a church homeless shelter, that I made the connection that much of Jesus' ministry had been tending to those at the margins. He had been healing the lame. Casting out demons. Stopping a mob of men who are about to stone a woman who had been caught in adultery. Feeding the hungry. Welcoming the children. He himself was imprisoned, and executed by capital punishment. I woke up to the fact that being poor, being on the margins is not shameful. Instead, the existence of poverty in the shadow of great abundance that is not shared is what is shameful.

Jesus invites the rich man in Mark to participate in something that is part of the nature of God's empire. Contrary to the Roman empire, which was characterized by hierarchical relationships-- whether from Emperor to subject, lord to servant, slave to master, husband to wife, father to son-- *God's* beloved community which Jesus was presenting is characterized by shared treasure and relationships of equal, where the last will be first and the first will be last, because in God's empire, each life has sacred worth.

Status and wealth are not things the rich man is willing to walk away from-- at least, not yet. We can read the story and wonder what actually came of the man. Jesus never forced his opinions on the man; he simply offered an invitation, which the man denied. But that piece of emptiness that brought the man to question Jesus in the first place might continue tugging at him and all he had built his life around. The bible says no more about him, but we can wonder if he opened up space in his life to experience the salvation Jesus was trying to offer him.

We often think about salvation as something that happens in the life to come. But Jesus implies that salvation is not just about an afterlife; it is also about this life now. In verse 21, Jesus says, "Give your money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Salvation is not just about riches stored in heaven; salvation also comes from the change that happens in your life-- in *this* life, here and now-- from following Jesus.

How can we be saved if we are not willing to be changed? What is one thing that is untouchable before God? For the rich man, it was his wealth. That may be so for many of us, but it also may be something else. Do you have anything so firmly lodged into your sense of self, that you're not willing to lose? What might it look like to loosen your grip on that and offer it to God? Each one of us is like the rich man, whether or not we have wealth, in that we came to church today because we are also looking for something more: whether it is to feel God's love, to be seen or noticed by God, to be part of something bigger than ourselves; to release guilt or shame; to learn how to follow Jesus' care and justice; or simply how to be a better person. In our own ways, we are reaching for something that is just beyond what we can access on our own, and we need Jesus to show us how to get there. What is left to be decided is whether, if we are blessed enough to be shown the way, will we have the courage to follow?

Simone Biles has been described as the GOAT-- the Greatest of All Time-- in gymnastics. With 32 Olympic and World Championship medals, she is the most decorated gymnast, ever. She has 1 floor skill, 1 beam dismount, and 2 vaults named after her. The vault she had been preparing for the Tokyo Olympics Preliminaries competition was an impressive 2 ½ twist; however, midair, she got a case of "the twisties" and, as she described it, "literally could not tell up from down;" she had "no idea" how she even landed on her feet after just 1 ½ twist. As it turns out, the twisties had been haunting her in practices and was something she just couldn't seem to shake.

"The twisties" is an adorable name for a life-threatening phenomenon. If a gymnast is hurling their body through the air, the disorienting experience of confusion between up and down could lead to a broken neck or worse. So, Simone Biles made the choice to leave it behind: the gold, the glory, the GOAT. Instead, she chose her life. I suspect we will learn more from her, if not about gymnastics, then maybe about what it means to claim your body and your life as your own.

The likelihood of any of us achieving what Simone Biles has done on the vault or any other gymnastics event, for that matter, is about as high as a camel passing through the eye of a needle. But what we can relate to is the idea that we have all had the twisties in our faith: disorienting moments when we can no longer tell the way: What is up, what is down? Where do I end, and where does God begin? This is what troubled the rich man as he left his conversation with Jesus in grief.

Consider these moments as a breakthrough, where Jesus is tugging at the contours of our lives and inviting us into something that may be uncomfortable, even terrifying--- yes-- but may in fact lead us into fuller participation in the beloved community God is forming for us and through us.

PRAYERS

We will soon hear from Julye Mynor from the Center for Hope and Safety. She brings with her the voices of women who have been made to feel last: physically, emotionally, spiritually, through the experience of violence by their intimate partners. For many of them, leaving their homes and partners behind to find safety took courage and risk. This church has a long-standing commitment to support these women and their kids with prayer, building support, and resources.

Money talks and power makes the world go around,  
or so they would have us believe;  
And we, forgetting that other voice,  
join the march in hopes that we may find a place  
among the rich and strong.

But, you, O God, feel no shame,  
fear no harm  
as you walk among the poorest and weakest  
feeling completely at home.

Thank you for the voice of your love  
that keeps singing of the power in weakness,  
the wealth in simplicity,  
and the freedom and safety that is found  
in walking your humble, serving way.

Amen.