**[1]** October 13, 2024
Sermon Title: A Needle’s Eye
Scripture: Mark 10:17-31
Theme: Exploring the riches of dwelling in the Word

“And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Grk. *Rhaphis; Lk. Belones*)than for someone who is rich to enter the kin[g]dom of God.” (v24-25)

**[2]** Completed in 1922, the South Dakota Needles Highway, in Custer County, is a spectacular 14-mile drive through pine and spruce forests, through meadows surrounded by birch and aspen, and, through the needle-like granite formations that seem to pierce the sky along the way. Anyone driving the highway must pass through a narrow tunnel called the “Needle’s Eye,” which is 8 foot wide and 9 foot 9 inches high. Expect to drive about 25 mph for about one hour, give or take 15 minutes or so. Buses and trucks must be no more than 8 feet wide to pass through the needle’s eye; always an exciting moment on the trip.

**[3**] In Utah’s Mormon history, there is a story about the early pioneers where they had to blast their way through the rock to get their wagons to the Colorado River. The gap in the rock was called “Hole-in-the-Rock” and was just wide enough to get a slimmed down wagon through to the other side, the ground through the gap being jagged and uneven, despite their having chiseled out steps to the best of their ability. A 45 degree slope down a 45 ft. high sheer cliff, they had to cut the cliff back about 300 ft. to make a passage wide enough for their wagons. It was the key to success of what was called the Escalante Shortcut, and saved the pioneers some 300 miles of traveling by a different road. On January 26, 1880, some 250 people in 83+ wagons, drove down the narrow passage to cross the Colorado River on a ferry, only 26 wagons making it across the river the same day. Each wagon driving down the passage had as many people hanging on to the wagon as there were footholds on the wagon, the wheel hubs of the wagons scratching against the rock walls.

**[4]** Legend has it that the “Needles’ Gate” leading into Jerusalem was such a passage, open only at night, it was a difficult, if not impossible, challenge for camels to pass through it. All the baggage strapped to the camel needed to be unloaded so that the camel could pass through, then reloaded afterward. We do not have any evidence supporting the existence of the Needle’s Gate, although we have some modern examples of what it might have looked like. And, some think this is the physical context for the response of Jesus mentioned in Mark’s gospel for today, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kin[g]dom of God.” (Mt. 19:24; Lk. 18:25), There are actually two different Greek words translated as “needle” in this verse; one in Matthew and Marks’s gospel, the other in Luke’s gospel. Matthew and Mark use a term common to households and meaning **[5]** “a sewing needle.” (*rhapis*) Doctor Luke uses an older term ‘*belones*’ which is more specific in its reference to a “surgical needle.” Is Doctor Luke giving Jesus and the disciples some wiggle room with his surgical translation? A difficult task, but not impossible? Or possible only with God? There is a Jewish Midrash on the Song of Songs that is tempting to quote here: “The Holy One said, open for me a door as big as a needle’s eye and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and camels.” If there is any wiggle room at all, Doctor Luke might say, then it is with God, the Holy One, and not ourselves. After all, surgical needles are much more rare than household ones.

There is an implied theological dialogue in our Scripture for today, which hovers between earnestness and contempt for what Jesus is suggesting. It is one thing to say I can shed my material riches, and another thing to actually do it. And Jesus is acknowledging the level of difficulty in understanding what it takes to pass over into campground, so to speak. Difficulty is the order of the day. God or Mammon? Choose carefully! For you cannot love both at the same time (Mt. 6:24)

Is the Way of Jesus, narrow or wide? Is it a narrow gate with a thin passageway that requires
shedding the non-essentials, offloading the incidentals, downsizing the inventory, simplifying the needs? (Mt. 7:13-14) Or is it a wide gate with a thick passageway that requires more from those who have been given more? (Lk. 12:48) Augustus Toplady published a hymn in 1776 entitled “Rock of Ages,” with the first words of this hymn becoming very popular: “Rock of Ages Cleft for Me, Let me hide myself in Thee.” It carries a certain spirit of the early centuries where many fled into the wilderness to become hermits, to live in caves, to get away from the world and the corrupting influence of materialism. Some would re-surface years later to speak truth to power with authenticity. The narrow gate brings to mind one of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Mt. 7:14)

**[6]** Was it not the mythical Odysseus, in Homer’s long poem, *The Odyssey*, who sought to inspire his crew to face down sure death in sailing down the narrow strait between the infamous Scylla and Charybdis? Thread the needle’s eye, indeed! Was he not the one who tried to tie down his ship’s crew (and himself as well) when passing by the sirens, to control their fears and keep them from jumping ship, but another thing, also to hold them away from deceptive riches? The Way of Scarcity often leads us to the cleft in the rock for protection (Ex. 33:22), but the Way of Abundance may lead us to a broader place (Ps. 18:19), out of our caves of confinement into freedom.

First, we should be wary of message that comes at us as self-referential and self-deceptive! Our Gospel is NOT a Prosperity Gospel. Jesus warns of the clever deception of wealth in his Parable of the Sower. He warns that the seeds sown among thorns represent those who have had the word choked out of them, strangled inside of them, such that they are unfruitful. Their wealth deceives them into a complacency that chokes the word planted inside of them. The deceit and deception of riches forms a strong impulse to take the broad and easy way. After all, one might say, “we can afford it, to spend lavishly on the highway to eternity, to pave it with gold.” That is the deception we fall into, that we can ride our accomplishments and riches into glory.

“Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17)

Note here the play on words in the verse between “uncertain riches” which is a noun, and the adverb “richly” which points us to the good gifts that God gives us. Is there a difference between “richly living” and “living richly?” I remember, in this regard, a quote from my youth minister, Rev. Tom Jolly, many years ago: “life is a gift from God and you are meant to enjoy it!”
Here are two verses of Scripture that ring true for me:

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, by his poverty, might become rich.” (2 Cor. 8:9) And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed (2 Cor. 9:8).

“Let the peace [from] God rule (*brabeuó* – make the call)in your hearts … and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ((*plousiós*); teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” (Col 3:16)

So, let’s explore this adverb “richly” with a little more depth “Let Christ’s word dwell in you richly.” Remember that an adverb attaches to a verb rather than a noun. It’s about dwelling richly rather than a rich dwelling. Remember that the adverb comes at the other end of an action verb. Whatever the verb describes as what you are doing, the adverb speaks of how you are doing it. For instance, in Ecclesiastes 9:10, as an example, the author calls on the reader, that whatever your hand finds to do, do it vigorously (adverb: heartily), as if you were doing it for the Lord God. The Psalmist warns us about those who speak peace with their lips, or to their neighbors, while war is in their hearts (Ps. 28:3; 55:21), **but** we are Christ’s people, with hearts set on peace. And, the author of Colossians writes in the same spirit of Ecclesiastes 9 and Psalm 28, “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Col 3:17).” Adverbs have another strange quality. They act in reverse: “In all you words and actions, speak and do them as though Christ were doing them (through you).”

In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes his body, the elements of communion, as his flesh and blood, as true food and truly drink. The adverb ‘truly’ indicating movement as we partake from the One loaf to the One cup. “Truly drink,” “dwelling richly.” They are related. Christ dwells richly in the Lord’s Supper. The Holy Spirit moves us through the elements as we partake of the One Body of Christ. When Paul speaks of letting peace rule in your hearts, he is using a Greek verb taken from athletic contests (Olympics) which means “**let the referee, the umpire, make the call on the field**.” You may honestly feel that the call is wrong, but the Spirit of the Sport, asks us to accept the ruling on the field. Sportsmanship means giving over authority to the referee, the umpire, even if you feel like complaining or throwing a temper-tantrum. The Spirit of Christ asks us to allow Peace to have the final word.

The spirit of the two passages, the spirit of dwelling richly, is precisely this, ‘that we allow the peace of God to umpire in your hearts! Athletically speaking, we allow peace to make the call when there is conflict in our hearts; that we allow the word of Christ to find a home in our hearts. Let peace not be a stranger; let Christ’s word not be a stranger! To dwell richly means to dwell close by, to dwell as a welcome friend, rather than a suspicious acquaintance.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul puts it this way: “When your voice sings, let your heart sing as well. When you make your plans, let the word of Christ be a permanent part of your thinking! There is a difference between being heavenly-minded and just being generically interested in the things of heaven. When we are heavenly-minded, all the resources of heart, mind and strength are under Spirit-Sway. Paul writes: “When you pray or sing in the Spirit, do so also with your mind (1 Cor 14:15), with your heart.” Let the word of Christ, the message of Christ, dwell richly, abundantly, but also redundantly. Let it dwell with plenty of backup and plenty of room.

Our generation had a saying: “Oh, that is rich!” It actually means the opposite of what you might think. If I said such a thing, it did not mean that I was giving a rich complement to someone. It did not mean that someone was incredibly generous to someone else. It meant that someone was criticizing someone else for what they themselves should be criticized. For the word of Christ to dwell richly, it must dwell inside of us as it dwells outside of us, not hypocritically, but transparently. Dwell richly in us, O Word of God!  Sing inside of us as we sing of your praise.

**[7]** And if you thought that is enough for me, there is more. The simple, yet impossibly challenging, plan of every Gospel is to spread the news of the boundless and inexhaustible riches of Christ (Eph 3:8), literally, riches that cannot be traced out (*anexichniastos*), riches that are past finding out, riches that are impossible to track, with such a redundance and abundance beyond comprehension and tracing, like riches no one ever imagined or could imagine, endless and infinite, unsearchable, unmatched, beyond understanding. And recursive, in that these riches feed into themselves in a never ending manner. In Colossians, Paul speaks to those who have never seen him face to face, those who will never know him in person, or recognize him in a crowd: “I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may know and have confidence in, all the riches of God’s mystery, Christ himself, in person, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Col. 2:1-3). And I would add, riches that will not always be hidden, but will be revealed as we are ready to receive them. ‘I want the eyes of their heart enlightened,” (Eph. 1: 18) says Paul, so that you may know the hope to which you have been called.

This mystery is set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, a plan to gather up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ, in the Son (Eph. 1:10), whom God has appointed, not only to be the creator of all things, but also to be the heir, the inheritor, of all things (Heb. 1:2) And, in turn, through Christ, we also are heirs (Rms. 8:17). ‘When Christ is fully revealed, you and I will also be fully revealed.’ (Col 3:4). I have come to believe that this is the meaning of saying “Christ is all in all.” (Col. 3:11).  The poet of Colossians uses this language to describe our new form of living in Christ, ‘no longer slave nor free, male nor female, Greek nor Jew, trans or cisgender, gay or straight, no longer people from the north or people from the south, nor east nor west, but one in compassion and love, ‘binding everything together in perfect harmony,’(Col. 3:14) kindness and patience, forgiveness and forbearance, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and the word of Christ to dwell richly in all we say, think and do (Col. 3:15-16). In this abundantly rich and inclusive nature, Christ is all in all. Alleluia! Amen!