

Building the Kin-dom of God (Mark 10.17-27)

by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins, Sunshine Cathedral (Oct. 11, 2009)

The people of antiquity who wrote plays and songs and poems and parables and myths and letters and sermons and biographies were writing from very particular experiences. Many of those ancient texts were collected into a canon of scripture by councils hundreds and in some cases thousands of years after the texts were first written.

Those early texts sometimes survived as oral traditions before they were written down. And when they were written, they were hand copied. And then those texts were translated, by human scholars, who copied their translated texts by hand. And so on.

There is no possible way to account for all the people who contributed either in forming a story, or retelling the story, or writing the story down, or recopying the story, or translating the story, or recopying the translated story...there is no way to know how many contributors...how many hundreds, multiple hundreds of people had some input into the texts that were eventually collected into what we call our bible.

But for all the hands involved in the evolution of those sacred stories, for all the years that passed and all the languages between the speaking of the stories and our hearing them in our context, for all the lives and lifetimes between the birth of those stories and our hearing them, a common theme runs through the sacred texts. And that common theme is that God sees the sacred value of all people!

The poor, the outcast, the infirm, the revolutionary, the prisoner, the child, the person living in an occupied land...the person on the margins, the person who has been denied opportunity, equality, or even voice is the person repeatedly highlighted in scripture. The marginalized person is raised up, acknowledged, affirmed, blessed, called God's child. Those who had been denied justice are the heroes of our sacred stories. They speak out and find their own agency and demonstrate that God's love fully includes them.

Even the primary prophet and hero of Christianity, Jesus himself, in spite of claims of royal ancestors was in fact a member of the peasant class of an occupied country...born in a barn to an unwed mother, often accused of blasphemy and heresy, and finally arrested for sedition, tried, convicted, tortured and killed. The person we say most demonstrates the reality of God with us, is someone who in multiple ways found himself disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed. And what do our sacred narratives say of this homeless born peasant criminal? That a divine voice says, "this is my child in whom I'm well pleased." The message to the outcasts, the untouchables, the forgotten, the despised, the wounded is very clear: **THESE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN IN WHOM GOD IS WELL PLEASED.**

In today's gospel, a wealthy man tries to blow smoke up Jesus' skirt, but Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter. He basically tells the rich person that he has the means to make a difference. It's fine that you respect your parents (from whom you probably inherited your wealth, so you are wise to respect them). It's fine that you don't kill or steal (living a life of luxury and privilege, there has probably been no need to resort to violence for survival). But have you done what you can to make a positive difference?

There is nothing wrong with abundance...in the Hebrew Bible abundance was considered a blessing from God. Most people aspire to some level of abundance. Even those who take vows of poverty usually have their needs abundantly supplied, and in spite of earning or owning very little, still live very comfortable lives. Abundance is a blessing; Jesus' question is, are we using our abundance to build up the kin-dom of God?

A retired person might have a lot of time...that person may want to share that time to help causes and organizations thrive. People with an aptitude for law or science might want to go law school

or medical school to help people by serving in those professions. People who are good orators and good organizers might want to run for public office. We'll want to share the gifts we have to make a difference in our world.

A person who can marry the person he or she loves won't want to hoard that blessing, but make sure that is available to all persons who want to make a loving commitment to each other. We all have something, and whatever we have is meant to be shared. ...time, enthusiasm, hope, rights, opportunity, goodwill, money...we all have something, and what we have is a blessing, and blessings are never meant to be hoarded.

And this young man has wealth...that's what he has to share. And apparently he hasn't been very generous with it. So Jesus, who loves hyperbole, who loves exaggeration...he's almost comical in his stretching an image to make a point...he says, "You want to do right...Sell everything you have and give every cent away!"

Really? And then tomorrow, at lunch time, how am I supposed to buy a sandwich? Hello?! Jesus isn't saying go broke to help others...he is saying whatever you have is a gift, so pass it on. Not everyone has a flexible schedule...if you do, then use your time to make a difference. Not everyone makes a lot of money...if you do, be generous.

And "a lot" of money is relative...if you are employed full time in this country, if you have a home and are reasonably certain you'll have it tomorrow, if you have decent health and a few good friends, if you have all the food and clean water you need...you are not only very blessed, but you are far richer than about 2/3 of the people on this planet.

Jesus isn't telling this man to become broke and homeless...what good could that possibly do? He is saying, "be aware of how blessed you are, and then realize that you are blessed to be a blessing. Pass on some of your good fortune...whatever you are blessed with, pass some of that on to help a good cause" (Jesus' cause being the kin-dom of God).

The rich man may have been wealthy, but he wasn't prosperous...because with all he had, he felt the need to hoard, to spend just on his own pleasures and comforts. He had plenty, but he didn't seem to believe he had enough to share. He was rich, but he wasn't prosperous. The prosperous person knows she's blessed, and wants to share her blessing with others. Some prosperous people are rich, and some prosperous people work for hourly wages or live on a fixed income...but they feel blessed and they try to share their blessings...so they are participating in divine prosperity.

Notice Jesus says it is hard for the rich to enter the kin-dom of God...he doesn't say it's hard for the prosperous! For those who know they are blessed and want to use their blessings to benefit others as well...that's what the kin-dom of God is about. Being our best and helping others be their best...that's the purpose of the Blessed Community, the kin-dom. Prosperous people actually resource the kin-dom of God. But those who no matter how much they have don't realize they have enough to share...well, they're missing out on the kin-dom because they aren't participating in it!

Jesus, again using hyperbole, "it's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye than for the rich to experience the Blessed Community." 1. Notice he doesn't say it's impossible for the rich to experience the divine Realm, he just says it's difficult for those who don't realize their wealth is a blessing and blessings are meant to be shared. 2. He uses a ridiculous image like a humorist might to make a point. A camel trying to squeeze through a needle's eye is funny. It's silly. Just like being rich but not understanding that you have enough to share is silly. Or, like having food and shelter and friends and health makes you rich, and if you don't know you're rich you may not be sharing your riches, because you don't even know how blessed you really are! Jesus uses a silly image to show us how silly we can be when we try to hoard our Good, rather than joyously circulating it.

I will add one trivial point about the image he chooses...Aramaic was the language that Jesus and his friends spoke, and at least one scholar has suggested that the Aramaic word for rope is very similar to the Aramaic word for camel...so camel might actually be a mistranslation! A human error from one of those story tellers, translators, or copyists who participated in the long tradition that brought the bible to us. And that certainly makes sense...but even so...a big rope being squeezed through a small hole is still a ridiculous image. The point isn't changed by our little linguistic discovery!

Jesus' disciples finally want to know who can be saved from despair and degradation if even the rich aren't guaranteed enlightenment. And Jesus says simply, everything is possible with God. When those who are wealthy wake up to their prosperity, the truth that they are blessed and are blessed to bless others, then they are naturally part of the kin-dom of God...the kin-dom of healing, the kin-dom of sharing, the kin-dom of demonstrating hope and love and goodwill.

And, likewise, those who aren't considered rich by worldly standards...once they realize that they too have gifts worth sharing, and share what they can, they are participating in the all-inclusive, life-giving kin-dom of God?

So, in the end...who has sacred value? Who deserves a life of hope, goodwill, joy, and fulfillment? Everyone, without exception. When we wake up to our divine potential, we'll let our light shine; we'll share our blessings with others, and we'll experience the kin-dom of God, because together, we will be the ones who are building it. This is the good news! Amen.

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**All that is God's is also mine.  
All that I have I gladly share.  
I have Love and life,  
Hope and happiness,  
Faith and fulfillment.  
I am blessed to be a blessing.  
I share my Good, and I never run out.  
And so it is!**

"Somehow, the act of self-giving is a personal power-releasing factor." Norman Vincent Peale