

## TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 11, 2015

Mark 10:17-31

*"The Old, Old Story"*

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Every family has stories. A favorite story in my family - probably because it makes me look bad, is about the time we were at a trout pond in Japan where you could catch your own fish and have them prepare it for you.

I was taking video of our oldest daughter Maya fishing. Well, she slipped on the bank and fell in! The water was only about 2 feet deep, so I figured she was fine, and kept video-taping, even though she was screaming and thrashing around. (I found out later she was deathly afraid that the fish would eat her!) I didn't get any father-of-the-week awards for that little adventure.

Stories are an important part of our family history and identity. This is true for the family of God, as well.

The Bible is filled with marvelous stories: stories about God as creator and redeemer; stories of human greed and sinfulness.

You know many of the characters: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah; Moses and Pharaoh, and on and on.

And the New Testament is full of stories about Jesus as well as all the wonderful parables Jesus loved to tell. All of the stories in the Bible are part of the main story of salvation: *"the old, old story of Jesus and His love."*

We like most of these stories. We heard **them first from parents or Grandparents, or in Sunday School**. I hope you still tell them to your own children, grandchildren, or nieces and nephews.

But let's be honest. **Some of the stories we'd just as soon ignore. They make us uncomfortable.**

So we don't like to hear them. But **those just might be the stories that we should listen to most**, because they were probably **told especially to challenge us**.

Today's Gospel text is one such story: the story of **the rich, young ruler**. If we made it contemporary, he'd probably come across as a religious yuppie, or a preppie. He's been **very successful** in everything he does, and he **has the possessions to prove it**. He's a man who's used to **finding out what he has to do for success**, and then doing it. He's read all the books: *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and, *"the Success Principles."*

And that's his attitude when he approaches Jesus. "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" he asks. He's already trying his best to obey the commandments. He has a copy of *the Purpose-driven Life*, on his night stand and he follows it religiously. And yet, **something tells him it's just not enough**. So he asks **what else** he must do to be saved.

Jesus tells him he lacks one thing. And then he tells him to get rid of all his possessions – the **Cadillac Escalade, the Condo in Florida, the 18 ft. Pro-V fishing boat**, and everything else he's worked so hard to acquire. Jesus tells him to sell everything, give the money to the poor, and follow him.

At this answer, the man is shocked and dismayed, and sadly walks away, because he has many possessions.

What was it this man lacked? **Did he lack poverty?** Is that what's required of anyone who would inherit eternal life? Have the Franciscan monks been right all along?

No. You see, Jesus is talking about something **much more basic, much more important** than having or not having **material things**.

There's a clue, to what this man lacked **in the very way he states his question: "*What must I DO to inherit eternal life.*"** His question contains **a contradiction**. **When he says, "to inherit eternal life," he's on the right track**, because we don't earn an inheritance. We simply receive because of whose child we are. But when he says, "***What must I DO...***," we can see where the problem lies.

Here's a man who's **gotten everything he has**: his position, his wealth, even his standing as an upright member of his religion by great dedication and effort. And there's nothing wrong with that.

But **it's that very "*can do*" attitude which causes the problem**. His question reveals that he **thinks his eternal fate is in his own hands** – something he can control.

He lacks a true **understanding of his situation before God**. He doesn't get that his **salvation doesn't depend on anything he can do, or anything he can control**.

His salvation depends ONLY ON THE GRACE OF GOD.

That's why Jesus tells him to get rid of his possessions.

**Possessions in themselves can't keep anyone from inheriting eternal life**, but Jesus knows that **for this man**, as for so many who have much, his many things keep him from relying only on God.

And this should make all of us here this morning nervous. Because **we too, have many possessions**. And it's just too easy to **rely on those possessions**, or on our power to achieve them, instead of on God.

We're tempted to think we can control whether or not we get into heaven.

And so, when we ask that misguided question, "*What must I DO,*" Jesus, out of his great love for us, answers by confronting us with an impossible task, just as he did the young man.

Why? So that we will finally see that **we're asking the wrong question**. Because if it's up to us; if we're going to insist on being in control of our own salvation, it's just not gonna happen. You want to **guarantee your own salvation**, or **earn your ticket to heaven**? It can't be done.

Instead of grabbing for it, try **letting go of everything you have**. Give up control. Leave it all in God's hands.

**But it's so hard!** And so we cry out with the disciples, "*Then, who can be saved.*"

We know, just as they did, that the death of self-reliance just isn't humanly possible.

It's just as impossible as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. As Robert Capon puts it,

*"You can't stuff a camel through an opening designed to take only a thread, and you can't get someone who has a great, fat, successful life to volunteer to go through the narrow eye of death-to-self."*

If this message doesn't **take our breath away**, then we **haven't really heard it**. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for you or me to enter the kingdom of God!

Do you get the point? For us, on our own, it's impossible!

Despite our possessions, despite our success, we **can't do what it takes** to inherit eternal life.

Ultimately, the most important issues; are **taken out of our hands**.

WE AREN'T IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT. It's not up to us!

Out of his great love for us, **God has decided to take matters out of our hands, and into His own hands**.

We can't stop ourselves from relying on our own efforts and our own possessions. It's impossible. But remember, for God, NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE.

Think again of all the wonderful stories that tell of God doing the impossible. Remember when Moses and the Israelites were fleeing from Pharaoh's army?

They were trapped at the Red Sea, **600 chariots thundering up from behind**, nothing but water in front of them. It was an impossible situation, but our God can do the impossible. He made a path through the waters for His people.

Or, remember how, in the early days of the church, the zealous Pharisee Saul was ruthlessly persecuting Christians, trying to stamp out this new religion?

But then **God grabbed hold of Saul – no decision theology here, by the way – God stopped him in his tracks and made a believer out of him.**

With God, anything is possible.

I'm sure many of you here today could tell **personal stories of** how God can do the impossible. In reality, each one of us is here today only because of the GRACIOUS AND IMPOSSIBLE LOVE OF GOD.

If it weren't for God's grace, we **could only turn and walk away from Jesus**, just like the young man in today's Gospel.

We need to retell these stories. And when we tell the stories, **we need to listen, too.**

Because whenever God's story is told, it has the power to break through, and **pull us, the listeners, into the story.** When that happens, suddenly, this becomes my story, and your story.

**We are there.** We are the one asking, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" We are the disciples, fearfully wondering, "*Then, who can be saved?*"

Out of his love for us, Jesus forces us to see that it's impossible. I can no sooner save myself than a camel can crawl through the eye of a needle. It can't be done. IT'S IMPOSSIBLE.

But with God, NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE. God can pull a camel through the eye of a needle. And God does a much more impossible thing

God, in Jesus Christ, performs the miracle of pulling us sinners through the needle's eye of his saving grace.

And WHEN WE COME OUT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT NEEDLE'S EYE, WE ARE CHANGED.

On the other side of the needle, we are new creatures. We are beloved, forgiven, children of God, and we are empowered to live for him and for others not out of fear of going to hell, but out of joy at being assured of our salvation: our inheritance as God's children.

We need to keep telling this wonderful story of Salvation. Because, in the words of today's hymn: "...those who know it best, seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest."

We Christians CAN NEVER GET ENOUGH OF THE STORY OF GOD'S GRACE!

It's a wonderful story that can **open our eyes to see all of life as a gift from God.**

It can even **transform us into cheerful givers. God's impossible grace has a way of doing that – of putting smiles on our faces and joy in our lives.**

So let's tell the old, old story – the story of Jesus and his love.

- Let's tell the story of **God's impossible grace.**
- Let's tell how God **delivers us** from all of the **impossible situations** we face in life.
- Let's tell of how his love can pull even **self-sufficient camels** like us through the **needle's eye of grace**, and **into the kingdom of God.**

Amen.