

Jesus said *what* now? “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” For centuries, there have been commentators and stories saying this passage is a reference to the Needle’s Eye gate—an actual gate into the city of Jerusalem—that was supposedly so small that people could not bring a large animal through it. Makes rationale sense of a non-rational phrase, right?

But contrary to the legends, Jewish scholars claim that there is not and never was an “Eye of the Needle” gate in Jerusalem. This is not a teaching about the physics of dromedaries and stone passageways. It also not simply about money. There is deeper teaching in the story if we let it interrupt our rational, logical way of thinking about things and hear the story more poetically.

Many of us in Western Christianity have lost touch with this ancient style of teaching story that is alive in Hassidic Judaism. There is a Talmudic tale, for example, that uses an elephant and a needle to make a similar point. But this technique of spiritual teaching is not just Christian or Jewish: It is much like the teachings of the Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi or the hundreds of Sufi teaching stories or chapter after chapter of the Dao de Jing.

Let me show you what I mean with a story that is told of Ryōkan Taigu. Ryōkan was a Soto Zen monk and poet who lived an austere and humble life in a thatched hut at the foot of Mount Kugami in Japan, miles away from the nearest town. One evening, while Master Ryōkan was out teaching, a thief came to the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal. When Ryōkan returned, he bumped into the thief. "You must have come a long distance to visit me," Ryōkan said to the prowler, "and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. Ryōkan sat naked in the moonlight, watching the retreating figure of the thief. "What a poor fellow," he sighed, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."

On one level, it's a lovely story about generosity and moonlight. But in Zen stories, the beautiful moon often symbolizes our deepest, essential nature, which in Christian terms we might say is unity with the light of Christ. Whether Jewish, Hindu, Daoist, Buddhist, Muslim or Christian, stories like these are intended to nudge the receiver into an insight into their deepest, truest self, which is our already/always unity with the Divine. These stories shake us out of the way we typically think of ourselves as only our individual, relative selves. Jesus offers the young man with many possessions access to an unlimited treasure—the kingdom of heaven—the very thing the young man desires most and that God most wants to give.

The young man kneels before Jesus, the doorway to eternal life and asks, “What must I *do*?” Jesus responds to the young man by first looking at him, really and truly seeing him, and loving him. Jesus, looking at the young man, loved him. Only then does Jesus *appear* to give the man something to do. “You lack one thing” or in some translations “there is only one thing you want.”

Now, the young man could respond by opening himself to receive the loving invitation into the kingdom of heaven that he has been freely given. Or he can remain attached to all that he had acquired. He chooses attachment and goes away grieving, in much the same way that the thief slunk away with Ryōkan's rather shabby clothes. I can imagine Jesus thinking something very similar to Ryōkan's lament: "What a poor fellow. I wish I could give him this beautiful moon. I wish he would receive the infinite love that only God can give."

The young man is not the only one shocked by Jesus' response. The ancient Greek, Roman and Hebrew world widely accepted material prosperity as the reward or at least a by-product of spiritual virtue. And there are more than a few Christian communities today that hold wealth to be God's bonus for those with sufficient faith. There are also more than a few Christians who will insist that those with wealth are sinning simply by attaining financial gains. All of these interpretations miss the point. *Material* gains and losses are secondary.

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.” The Greek is much more evocative. “How *squeamishly* will the ones who

have money enter the kingdom.” You see, it is our dependence on *anything but God* that Jesus invites us to let go of so that we can receive what God is already giving. The central mystery in Mark’s Gospel that is still so difficult to understand is that life given for the sake of others leads to fullness of life. The world opposed to this Gospel reality sees self-promotion as the path to glory.

The wisdom of God’s kingdom is built on a paradox: life at its fullest and most meaningful is life freely given for others. Life given by choice, that is to say, in the way that Jesus gave his life for others. Throughout his entire ministry, Jesus lived this pattern; the pattern of the cross. Living out that pattern is how the kingdom of God breaks into human life, which we acknowledge and celebrate in our Eucharist. We are grateful for the entire life pattern of Jesus Christ, who shared our human nature, who lived and died as one of us, and who reconciled us to God.

Life at its fullest and most meaningful is life freely given for others. This is the essence of the invitation to the young man that he cannot bring himself to receive. Jesus has named what binds the young man—it is his *captivity* by his own acquisitions that prevents him from the foretaste of the eternal freedom that Jesus offers.

Perhaps Jesus is even offering a clue when he says, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Some mystics say that to add anything to the phrase “I Am” is to distance ourselves from God, the Great “I Am.” Mystics say that we can experience our unity with “I Am That I Am” only by loosening our grip on any identifier beyond “I Am.” That is to say that perhaps the young man identified himself as “I am *good*” or “I am *righteous*” because he lived up to the commandments. Perhaps “I am *wealthy*” was the part of the man’s *identity* that he had trouble giving back to God. Mark’s Jesus encourages each of us to rethink what it means to be a student, a nurse, a homeowner, a parent, yes, even a priest. To loosen our identity as who we define ourselves to be and what we expect that definition to provide us. To recast the roles and possessions we have been given in light of the kingdom’s call to serve and give life to others.

Jesus tells to Peter that there is no one who has released their possessions, their roles or identities who does not gain a hundred times as much. As children of God, our heavenly identity, we are heirs of *all of creation*. What is left to possess? The act of dying to our self-definition *as* our possessions, *as* our titles or *as* our roles does not, of course, bring about salvation. That is impossible for mortals, but with God all things are possible. That is the point of this story.

If we have prayed on our knees before the Risen Christ who looks at each of us and loves us, deep within, we come to know that the Gospel message is true: that life at its fullest and most meaningful is life freely given for others. That truth is hard to see and hear at times. Hard to see when money gets tight. Hard to see when a child, a spouse or a parent is gravely ill. Hard to see when self-centered, greedy and unkind people appear to be thriving. It's hard to release the patterns of an old identity in an old worldview and open ourselves to receive a new identity as a child of God. What God makes possible is a new life built on the promises of God that shows up in our lives in the patterns of the cross that we learn from the life and ministry of Jesus.

Makes me wonder: what am I—what are you—still clutching as we come to Christ on our knees like the rich, young man? What camels are we trying to drag through the eye of the needle into the mystery of the always, already present and absolute love of Christ?