

“One Hump or Two”
Mark 10:17-31
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As I am not a zoologist, I have only limited ability to speak to the anatomical peculiarities of animals in the order Artiodactyla. But I am a good web surfer and learned there more about camels than I ever thought possible. Most importantly I learned not only the physical difference between a Dromedary and a Bactrian, the difference being one hump versus two, but also that the former species of camel is found in the Middle East and the latter in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia and China. Clearly then it was the one humped dromedary form of camel with which Jesus would be familiar, and thus he would not have known, except in that “Creator of the world” sort of way, about the two-humped, Bactrian camel. We must presume then that Jesus was either speaking in a strictly human way or that he chose to withhold from the disciples the evidence of the other species, even when it would have made the illustration of the difficulty of wealthy people entering the kingdom of heaven even more startling. As you will soon see, however, the story really lends itself to thinking about the two-humped variety, and so I hope you will permit me some biological and poetic license. Incidentally, the term “dromedary” is derived from the Greek word “dromos” meaning “road” and so was applied to the Arabian racing camel which can travel 80 to 120 miles per day carrying a rider as well as the more pedestrian Arabian baggage camels

which have a heavier build and are capable of carrying a 400 pound load up to 40 miles per day.

Perhaps then Jesus used this example of the *dromos* because he has just set out on a journey and was wishing he had a camel on which to ride. Lacking transportation, we find him “setting out on a journey” when he is confronted by a man seeking the answer to life’s most persistent question: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” After Jesus gently corrects him on the proper usage of the term “good,” which should only be applied to God, Jesus recites for the man a portion of the ten commandments, the Jewish law, as if to say that this is what is required to obtain the golden ticket to the pearly gates. And when the man replies that he has kept all of these commandments, and perhaps is expecting to hear that he is on the A-list, Jesus adds a little something extra which sends the man away “shocked” and “grieving,” or in more poetic translations, “sorrowful,” for he had many possessions.

The words Jesus gives him of course are some of the most challenging words in the Bible, especially for we who have a significant share of the world’s wealth, at least by comparison, and whether or not we think our bank accounts support that claim. “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” Images of people like St. Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa come to mind as we think about the practical implications of strictly following this command, and

we respond with much the same perplexity Jesus' own disciples displayed. Even if I wanted to, how would it be possible? How can Jesus ask so much of us? Laying aside those questions for a moment, the more pressing question, at least for me, is why Jesus would say such a thing in the first place when he has just laid out the commandments as if to say they were enough. It seems to me that the answer to that question is found in the most telling part of the story, in Jesus' rationale for telling him what he lacked. We are told in verse 21, that "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," and then said what needed to be said. Jesus may have seen the man's clothing and deduced that the only way he could have accumulated so much wealth as to be standing there dressed in so much finery was because he was one of those people who, in the words of the prophet Amos, "sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals, [people] who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way," or who, in the words of the prophet Micah, cause God to say, "Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure of the accursed? Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights. Your wealthy are full of violence." Seeing that a confession of the man's shortcomings was not forthcoming from his own lips, Jesus knowingly points out the inobvious, and reminds him that the finer points of the law and faith include issues related to our wealth, and that this man had likely violated more than he had imagined. This man's repentance must fit the crime; he must give it all away.

This is the telling part of the story because to leave the man deluded into believing that his wealth was not a part of the spiritual equation would not have been a truly loving thing to do. Love, to Jesus' way of thinking, means speaking the truth and saying what is uncomfortable, risking rejection, jeopardizing relationships, calling people to justice. It is for this same reason that the church risks alienating each of you about this time of year when stewardship season rolls around and you are asked to consider your giving to God's purposes through our church. It is, as I have suggested in the past, dereliction of duty to avoid taking about issues of money, wealth, and giving, precisely because they are such profoundly spiritual and Biblical issues. Look no further than the conclusion to today's story if you think money and wealth do not belong in discussions of faith and eternal life. "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." The opportunity to inherit what does not perish was lost for the need to cling to what rusts and is eaten by moths.

Another zoological example makes this clear. One of the best ways to catch a wild monkey is to appeal to the same instinct of the man who went away sorrowful. A hole is made in a coconut just large enough to allow a monkey's hand to enter. This coconut is then filled with flavored rice and hung from a tree until it has fulfilled its purpose. An ill-fated monkey comes along, a monkey who incidentally has kept all the commandments, and reaches in to grab hold of the rice. The only problem is that with a fist full of rice, the monkey cannot remove

its hand because it won't fit back through the hole, and being the greedy little creature he is, will cling to the rice until the nice trapper comes along who relieves him of his liberty. What price freedom? Should the church not place markers on the dangling coconuts of the world?

One way to approach this passage as a stewardship text is to say that it calls everyone to give all they own to the poor, namely the church, and all will be well. You may of course, feel free to do so. A more nuanced approach, however, is to look at the passage and try to glean something which helps us to think about our money, wealth, and giving from a spiritual perspective. And for this, I will employ the aforementioned camels to assist me.

The outrageous metaphor of a camel passing through the eye of a needle is one of Jesus' best. Its picture of impossibility is far better than the ones about mountains being thrown into the sea, or tiny mustard seeds becoming huge trees. and it is comical as well, showing Jesus' sense of humor. But if there was nervous laughter among the disciples at this mental image of impossibility, it was quickly dispelled when Jesus sobered them up by announcing that indeed it is impossible – for mere mortals – “but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Though Jesus is speaking more specifically about the salvation of rich people, we must surely add to the realm of the possible the resolution of the dilemma of the camel. Suddenly, all bets are off.

But if passing a camel with one hump through the eye of a needle is a miracle – and we can envision the disciples picturing this when Jesus says that with God all things are possible – if passing a dromedary through the eye of a needle is a miracle, how much more a witness to God’s power and possibility is passing through the second hump of that Bactrian camel? And so, how would you like *your* God, one hump or two?

I offer this meditation on camels because I believe we must not limit ourselves or God’s possibilities by thinking only as far as our own Middle East, our own experience. Those Bactrian camels, far away in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia, were beyond the conception of Jesus or his disciples, but it is no less possible for them to pass through the eye of a needle simply because the disciples were unaware of them or because they have two humps. In other words, we cannot be satisfied with settling for the miraculous we can see or even imagine, for to do so is to limit God’s power in precisely the way that the man who went away sorrowful does when he cannot see the possibility that stands before him in the middle of the street. We human beings are very good limiting the power of God even when we are able to experience it. One hump or two. Believing in the miraculous or believing beyond the miraculous. One hump or two. Believing in God or believing in all of God’s possibilities. One hump or two. Believing enough to get by or believing beyond ourselves. Let me put this metaphor in the context of our stewardship as followers of Christ and I think you’ll see what I mean.

In a very real sense, it is miraculous that we give anything at all. We human beings are inherently greedy, self-seeking creatures, the product of the experience in the garden. Left to our own devices, we would hoard and protect and plan and scheme all in a vain effort to secure for ourselves that rice in the coconut, but by the grace of God we have learned something of the virtues of giving, and so we are able to relax our grip and remove our hands that they may be used to give. But as miraculous as it is that we give, generally we still give grudgingly, unable to grasp fully the possibilities of God's generosity. We are like Peter who very probably expected that the reward for following Jesus would be that he would get back a reasonable return on what he had invested, when in fact God provides a hundredfold in ways Peter never could have expected. How might Peter have lived his life as a disciple of Jesus as a two-hump believer? How might we live ours if we believed that giving generously is really possible?

One hump or two. The difference between thinking about stewardship as paying for something you get at church, and giving from the grateful part of your heart even when others seem to get more for their money.

One hump or two. The difference between giving the least you can get away with giving, and giving more than you dreamed possible of being able to give.

One hump or two. The difference between what is my share of how much the church needs and how much God is calling me to give.

One hump or two. The difference between giving haphazardly and from what is left after all the other bills are paid and giving with discipline and from the first fruits of your income.

One hump or two. The difference between giving and giving a specific percentage.

One hump or two. The difference between giving at the same level as last year, and giving a step up, as Judith described earlier in the service.

As you think about the humps in your life in preparation for Consecration Sunday, take this final thought home with you. When Peter asks about himself, and his place in the kingdom, since he has seemingly given it all, Jesus responds by saying that not only does Peter have a place, but that God gives back far more than we can ever give. Whoever leaves house or family or field, he says, will receive them back a hundredfold, both now and forevermore. But do not mistake this for some kind of prosperity gospel. That hundredfold return is certainly of the greatest value, but it is not the same stuff which was given in the first place.

When Jesus describes a hundredfold return of houses, he does not mean Peter will become a wealthy, rent collecting property owner, but that he will experience a profound and miraculous sense of hospitality, both among fellow Christians and in heaven. When Jesus describes a hundredfold return on family members, he does not mean Peter's family will grow in size and influence but that he will experience an amazing and miraculous community of fellow believers, both on earth and in

heaven. When Jesus describes a hundredfold return of fields, he does not mean that Peter will become a gentleman farmer but that he will, by seeking the justice, love, and peace of Christ, experience a difficult but miraculous field of persecution for the sake of the gospel.

All of these rewards, of course, are the very mission and grace of the church of Jesus Christ – to provide and experience hospitality, to be and invite people into authentic community, to share and benefit from Christ’s ministry of justice, love, and peace. None of them are possible for mortals, and especially not for mortals who believe that the miraculous has limits. But the good news of the gospel is that for God, all things are possible, and that there are no limits on God’s generosity. May God bless each of us abundantly, in ways we never expected but that God desires for us and for all. Amen.