

21 October 2012
Pentecost 21

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

"His Poverty Makes Us Rich"

Text: Mark 10:23-31; Ecclesiastes 5:10-20; Hebrews 4:1-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Good things in bad hands are dangerous.

Take a scalpel, for example. In the hands of a skilled surgeon, a sharp knife like that is a good thing, a healing thing. But put one of those in my hand and I'll probably either inflict harm on myself or you! A gun is another example. Good in the hands of a hunter, bad in the hands of a criminal. The pills in your medicine cabinet are good when taken according to the prescription and directions, but dangerous and lethal when taken too much or for the wrong reasons. Even computers - what a blessing they are with e-mail and e-commerce and things that make our lives so much easier; but how harmful and damaging in the hands of those who create viruses and worms and those who would steal your identity.

And so it is, Jesus is saying today, **with wealth**. Money, riches, great possessions are not bad in and of themselves; but put them in the hands (or maybe I should say: *the hearts*) of sinful men, and the trouble begins.

Now, that might sound a little over-the-top, right? Wealth in the same list with guns, knives, drugs, and computer hackers! But consider . . . What great fights break out in families over inheritances. Money has long been the leading cause of strife in marriages. People get trampled - *and even killed* - by hoardes rushing stores on Black Friday. How many get-rich-quick schemes are dreamed up every year? And how many people get taken in by them and lose all they have? How many people's savings vanish because of the lure and promises of gambling and the lottery? How many parents spend little or no time with their children because they need more money? How often does our relationship with God take a back seat to the pursuit of wealth?

Jesus knows what He's talking about. One of the most insidious and dangerous false gods is wealth. We serve it, we love it, we fear not having it. The desire for more so easily captures our hearts and minds. That's why Jesus said, ***How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the***

kingdom of God.

Now, some have tried to soften that saying up a bit, and you've maybe heard the popular explanation that there was a gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle," and that gate was smaller than the other gates, and a camel heavy laden with all kinds of goods could not get through there. You'd have to unload in order to get through.

To which I say: *baloney!* The disciples knew what Jesus was saying. That's why after Jesus says that their astonishment rises to a new level - they are **exceedingly astonished**. They're not thinking about having to unload camels to get through a small gate, but about jaw-dropping impossibilities, that then leads them to wonder, **"Then who can be saved?"**

We heard about riches today also from King Solomon in his book of Ecclesiastes. "Tell all" books are popular in our day age. Folks write their stories, what happened to them, their falls and triumphs, and those book often quickly rush to the top of best seller lists. Well that's (in a way) what Ecclesiastes is - it is Solomon's story, and about the mistakes he made. And one of those mistakes was with wealth. For Solomon wasn't just rich, he was wildly rich. And so when he (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) writes about the danger of riches - that **he who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them** - he's telling you something. He lived it. And we do well to listen.

So what's the answer? Is it to *sell everything we have and give to the poor*? That's what Jesus told the rich young man last week. But as I said last week, that's not the answer. That's not the answer any more than cutting off your sinful hands and feet and plucking out your sinful eyes is the answer. Remember Jesus said those things too. But even if we did all those things, we would still have a problem: **our sinful hearts**. You don't have to have riches to love them as your god. You don't have to commit sins to wish that you did, or could. And it is when we look at our hearts - at the wealth of sinfulness and vileness and idolatry that lives there, deep down - that we say with the disciples, **Then who can be saved?** For truly, putting a camel through the eye of a needle is easy when compared to making our hearts and lives clean and right and worthy of eternal life and salvation.

Peter thought getting rid of everything might be the answer, though, too. Good ol' Peter! **"See, we have left everything and followed you,"** he says. And Jesus' answer is interesting. Whatever you've left for His sake and the Gospel, Jesus says, you get back a hundredfold - our Lord doesn't want us to live in poverty and do without. He wants us to enjoy what He has given, and (as we hear in these words) *He keeps giving to us*. When we do not love and hold onto the things of this world and life,

we do not get poorer but richer. You cannot out-give your giving God.

But we not only receive *these* things, Jesus says. He adds something else too, something very significant: ***with persecutions***.

Ah, there's the catch! Because there's always a catch, right? If it sounds too good to be true it probably is, and all that. . . . But no, actually. **This is not the catch but the cross.** The cross your loving and giving Father gives you so that your wealth doesn't become your god. So that you rely on Him for what you need. For while we often see persecution as a bad thing, remember what Jesus said about it? *Blessed are you when you are persecuted* (Matt 5). That's why Jesus put this "*with persecutions*" on the end of the list of all those good things God gives. For He gives all things for your good, for your blessing. To make you rich not just in one way, but *in every way*. **That bearing this cross you turn to His cross**, and turning to His cross realize that it is not *your* poverty that will save you - it is Jesus' poverty that saves you.

Jesus' poverty. The rich, eternal Son of God who became poor for our sakes, with no place to even lay His head (Matt 8:20). Who left His throne to be born in a manger. Who left His royal court of angels to be surrounded by a dozen well-intentioned but bungling disciples. Who is the Life of the world but who came to bow His head in death - your death, because of your crimes, your covetousness, your idolatry, your chasing after more. *And He did so to make you rich*. That by His perfect life, undeserved death, and triumphant resurrection, you - who otherwise would deserve and have nothing - would receive the riches of His forgiveness, His righteousness, His holiness, His kingdom, His life, His peace, His rest. You see, Jesus did the impossible, the thing only God could do. He saved you.

So that's where Jesus wants your attention. All this other stuff He wants you to have and enjoy, too - but not at the expense of Him, not at the expense of life. He loves you too much to just hand you over to your stuff.

Which is why God sent all those - we could call them *persecutions* - upon the people of Israel in the wilderness. He did, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, so **that they might enter His rest**. He did, so that they would rely on Him and not on themselves. So that they would look to His strength and not the strength of their foes. So that they would fear, love, and trust in Him above all things. Without those things, those persecutions, they doubted and feared and ran away. But with those crosses, they turned to Him, relied on Him, and received His rest.

And so it is with you. "*With persecutions*" doesn't simply mean that *we have to accept the bad with the good* - it is good on top of good, grace upon grace. Your Father loving you and keeping you and drawing you always back to Him, back to

His greater gifts. That it not be the worldly things we receive that we consider our greatest good, but the heavenly gifts that are given to us - the gift of baptism, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of our Lord's own Body and Blood. And that we find here, in these gifts, our peace and rest. The peace and rest of being children of God. The peace and rest of knowing that our sins can no longer separate us from God, but that we have been reconciled with our Father. The peace and rest of this heavenly food given to us here in the wilderness of this life. These gifts that though you be first or last, poor or rich, or somewhere in between, are for you and for all, that all be rich in Christ Jesus.

So, as Solomon would advise, enjoy what you have. If you have plenty, share with those in need. If you have little, rejoice that your life is free from the clutter of wealth. But in all things, as Solomon would also say, give thanks to God. For unlike us, all things in His good hands are good, and He does all things well, **for you.**

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Thanks to the Rev. William Cwirla for some of the thoughts in this sermon.)