

Date: October 29, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 30 (Ordinary 28 texts)

SERMON: Threading the Needle

Text(s): Hebrews 4:1-2, 9-13; Mark 10:17-31

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Reading our Gospel lesson for today, brought back a memory from our time living and working in Malaysia back in the 1970's. Though Malaysia is a multicultural nation with freedom for all religions to practice their faith, Islam is the official national religion. Though I didn't understand it then, I can now see in hindsight that this event was a sign pointing to the situation we find ourselves in today, with the culture and values of Western civilization once again in a clash with the culture and values of the Islamic world.

In Malaysia, one of the national public holidays is the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, celebrated with parades and speeches by politicians and religious leaders on the central *padang* as the town green was called.

For several years during our time there, the keynote speaker was a layman man named Haji Abdul Karim Abdullah. He was a gifted speaker and a real crowd-pleaser. I always went down to the town green every year to hear him, and his sermons were always worth listening to, both for their content and their rhetorical flair.

One year, his sermon was a strong critique of the impact of Western culture and values on developing nations. He attributed the materialistic greed of the West for the developing world's natural resources to a decline in religious faith. He hit upon a very clever and effective rhetorical device to get his point across. Borrowing Descartes's famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am," he applied a variant of that phrase to the last four centuries of Western self-understanding and behavior.

In the 17th century, which some Western historians label "The Age of Faith," he said, the watchword of Western self-understanding was "I believe, therefore I am." Descartes led the shift

from faith to reason in the 18th century with his slogan, "I think, therefore I am." The Enlightenment produced, in the 19th century, the rise of capitalism and its handmaiden, colonialism, which attempted through both commerce and missionaries and military force to bring the blessings of Western civilization to the poor benighted heathens in the rest of the world, and the self-understanding of the West became, "I colonize, therefore I am." On he marched to the 20th century, where after recalling the devastation of the world wars, the decline of Christianity, and the consequent rise of materialistic consumerism, the new self-understanding of the West could be summed up by the slogan, "I buy, therefore I am."

Needless to say, he had the crowd in the palm of his hand by that point. But leaving aside his main point which was the superiority of Muslim religion and culture over western, I did have to admit that there was more than a germ of truth in his clever characterization of western society. It's hard to deny that in our society, people do often define themselves by their possessions or their material wealth. For better or worse, in our society, possessions confer status. And how could it be otherwise when every newspaper, every television commercial, every billboard along the highway, every magazine ad sends us the message, "You are what you have, you are what you wear, you are what you drive, you are what you drink," and so on. Who can deny that what keeps our economy running is the determined effort of businesses to come up with ever more attractive things that we can be enticed to consume, most of which, if we were honest, are superfluous to our lives. "I buy, therefore I am." We sometimes like to think that here in Maine we're above that, but let's get real. How many trips to Target or Best Buy or Lowes have you made in the last month?

I don't agree with Haji Abdul Karim Abdullah that the tendency to make our possessions the basis of our self-understanding is a purely Western tendency. Certainly the story Mark tells us of Jesus' encounter with the rich

young man suggests that the tendency to become possessed by our possessions is hardly a new one or exclusively Western. Malaysia itself is a flourishing example of materialistic consumerism, and to be fair, that trend within his own country was exactly what Abdullah was warning against.

The young man who comes to Jesus appears to be a good man. Mark doesn't portray him as some greedy, rapacious corporate raider, gobbling up other companies or a ruthless banker foreclosing mortgages on poor people's houses. He's a deeply religious, deeply moral, reflective person. And just because he is such a deeply reflective and serious person, he comes to Jesus to ask a serious question. "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus' initial reply seems to treat this question almost casually, as though it were not a serious question. "*Well, you know the commandments,*" Jesus says, "*Do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother, etc.*"

The young man then demonstrates to Jesus that he's not just asking a casual question. This is a question that comes from deep inside him. "*Yes, I do know the commandments, and I've observed all of them from my youth.*" Mark tells us that then Jesus looked at him a little more closely. He looked into this young man's face and saw there a spiritual longing for something more than mere uprightness. Mark says that as Jesus looked at this earnest, seeking young man, he loved him. And just because he loved him, his next words cut right to the heart of the man's quest. His answer to the man's question is a radical answer. It goes to the root of the man's problem.

"All right," Jesus tells him, "since you're really serious about this business of eternal life, then I'll tell you how to find it. You've been looking for it in the wrong place. You've been looking for eternal life in your possessions. You've been building your life on wealth, on stuff. And stuff is transient. It doesn't last. So

if you really want to know real life, eternal life, life that is built on a foundation that lasts, you've got to set your heart's love on something else. So go get rid of your things. They've become an idol, your real god, and they've blinded you to the needs of your poor neighbors. *So go, sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come and follow me.*"

The young man's response to this radical suggestion proves that Jesus' insight into his own self-definition is accurate. Mark tells us that "*when he heard this he was shocked, and he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*" Isn't that a rather strange word to use for the man's reaction—grieving? It might be more accurate to say that his many possessions had him. He couldn't imagine a life that could be meaningful and rich and full that didn't include his many possessions. Nor was he able to experience compassion. He couldn't see any relationship between the abundance of his own possessions and the desperate need of the poor around him. When the focus of our attention and our energy is on our possessions, then our possessions are no longer our servants; they have become our masters. They limit our freedom, they block our compassion, they cocoon us in comfortable, but ultimately bleak, loneliness.

Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian minister who is also an award winning novelist and poet, has said that the trouble with us having as much money and possessions as most of us have is that we can solve virtually all of our problems with the checkbook. We don't have to struggle with the basic necessities of survival, hunting or growing our own food, making our own clothes, building our own shelter, all of which activities occupy a large portion of the time and energy of most people in the world. Instead, our checkbooks solve most of these problems for us, and so we are left with the great questions of life to contend with: how to be happy, how to find meaning and purpose in life, how to love and be loved. While it is to our great

benefit to have the leisure to consider these questions rather than being consumed by the daily struggle to survive, we also risk falling into the trap of thinking that our checkbooks can answer these deeper questions too. The things that we buy become substitutes for happiness, for meaning, for love. And time and time again, we discover, to our great pain, that our checkbooks cannot feed those deep hungers of our hearts. Like the young man in the story, we have everything but the one thing we most want and need, real life—eternal life.

Jesus himself appears stunned by the hold this man's possessions have on him, for he turns to his disciples and exclaims, *"How hard it is 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"* His disciples are absolutely shocked by this statement, for it turns their whole theology on its head. *"Then who can be saved?"* they ask in astonishment. Their question is logical enough. It was commonly believed in ancient Judaism, and still is in many circles, including the old Puritan circles out of which New England Congregationalism emerged, that material wealth is a sign of God's blessing and favor. Or as our Puritan ancestors with their Calvinistic theology would have put it, that they were among the Elect.

The flip side of that smug, self-congratulatory theology is that if you are poor, it's because you're not working hard enough at being upright, and therefore, you're paying the price of moral laxness with your poverty. With a theology like that, whether openly affirmed or unconsciously subscribed to, no wonder Jesus said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who's rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. And if Jesus' analysis is true, then it puts most, if not all of us here, in a predicament, for in relation to the vast majority of people in the world, we are all rich. We don't feel that way, because we're used to measuring

ourselves against others around us. I'm not rich because my neighbor has much more than I do. But our yardstick isn't long enough. If Jesus is right, threading the needle, for the majority of us, is going to be a pretty tall order.

That's why it's important that we take some time, periodically, to think about our relationship to our possessions, and to remind ourselves that we are called to be stewards of God's gifts, not possessors of them. Stewardship campaigns in church are one way to do that. In fact, that's the main point of having a stewardship campaign. Contrary to the way we sometimes think, stewardship campaigns are not primarily for the purpose of raising the money for the church budget. Funding our budget is a by-product of stewardship. The first question is not "How much does the church need," nor "How much does the church need me to give?" At best those are second or third-order questions. The real question for all of us all the time is "To whom or what do I accord ultimate worth? Who or what do I regard as the Really Real? Who or what do I worship?" Do I have my possessions, or do my possessions have me? When we get that question right, then we immediately recognize that we are not owners, not possessors, but stewards of God's gifts. And the question that will immediately follow is not "How much does the church need," but "How much do I need to give in order to be a faithful steward?" How can I use the gifts God has entrusted me with to make the world a better place? And that's a very different kind of question, isn't it? That's not a question about budgets, but a spiritual question about how we find eternal life.

Once we begin to grapple with the real questions, "What is Ultimately Real" for me, and "How can I be a faithful steward?"—then we can take some concrete steps to help us stick to the path we have chosen of seeking God's kingdom first.

We can work to raise our awareness of how much our society and we are driven by

consumer values. Working, buying and saving according to our real needs rather than according to our inflated desires or because of social pressure is an important step toward dethroning the idol of wealth. I don't know about you, but hardly a day goes by that we don't get at least two or three catalogues in the mail, urging us to buy more stuff. Especially at this time of year as we approach the holidays, the appeals from merchandisers become ever more insistent. You've got to buy this. You can't live without this. Your children will never forgive you if you don't buy them this video game. We need to pay attention to what priorities we're being asked to set on our use of money and what we're being urged to acquire.

When we become aware of how possession-driven we are, we can take a further step. We can determine up front what percentage of our income we will give away rather than acquiring more stuff. Such an upfront commitment is an expression of our desire to become faithful and compassionate stewards of God's gifts. There's little that is more freeing, more liberating, than a decision to give something away, especially if it's something you've worked for and earned. Again, it has nothing to do with economics. It has nothing to do with what you think you can afford. It's a spiritual commitment taken prior to any calculation of income and expenses.

Christians have always affirmed the biblical practice of tithing, giving at least 10% of our income away, as a good way to make that spiritual commitment to stewardship concrete. For most members of the United Church of Christ in Maine, that would be an enormous step to take, since according to statistics from our denominational headquarters, the average percentage of income currently given by members of UCC churches nationwide is 1.9 %, and here in Maine, it's only 1.3%. But as a goal to move toward, it wouldn't be difficult for most of us to commit to increasing our giving by 1 or

2 percent each year until we reach the goal of tithing. Carol and I committed ourselves to becoming tithers when we got married, and I can only testify that that decision was probably one of the most important and fulfilling decisions we've ever made. Time and time again, we have experienced the freedom that decision made so long ago has brought to us, and the blessing of having been able to share God's gifts through the organizations and causes we support.

A third step is to deliberately seek out others who are also trying to focus on their search for God's kingdom rather than on the abundance of their possessions. For me, that's one of the prime values of being part of the church. At least here in church, I'm more likely to meet other people who are struggling to avoid the consumer trap and be faithful stewards of God's gifts than I am in just about any other place. We can encourage each other, hold each other accountable in love, pray for each other, support each other. There's a real sense in which there is safety and strength in numbers. If society exerts pressure on us to conform to its values, then we need an alternative society, the community of Christ, to exert a different pressure.

This struggle to cast the false god of materialistic consumerism from its throne is one which lasts a lifetime. It's a battle which must be entered and fought and won again and again and again. Jesus gave us hope; it may seem impossible to us, he said, but with God all things are possible, even the unlikely prospect of the rich threading the needle and entering the kingdom. Our part is to be willing to struggle with our faithfulness to the Really Real. In placing all our hope, all our security in God rather than in the abundance of our possessions, we will discover what we have always been seeking even when we were seeking for it the wrong places. We will discover eternal life.