

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B  
October 11, 2009  
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

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## “Opening The Eye Of A Needle To God”

Amos 5:6-7,10-15, Psalm 90:12-17, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-31

I heard more than once that “the eye of the needle” was a common term for a very small gate in the wall around Jerusalem. A camel could only pass through this gate, if the rider dismounted and removed all of the goods the camel was carrying. I thought it was a good story, and taught us a lot about how we need to be unburdened of our worldly possessions if we are to make it through the gates of heaven. In researching for this sermon this week, I found that this story is false, that it was an invention of a teacher in the middle ages, and that people for hundreds of years have used this legend to help us wealthy Christians feel better about the seeming impossibility of a rich man reaching the kingdom of heaven.

So if you go to visit Jerusalem, don't ask where this gate is, because they will laugh at you as they laugh at all Christians who ask about it, when they are making a pilgrimage to the holy city.

I was disappointed to find this, because I thought it would be a good story, and as I reflected on that, I realized that I was disappointed because I had bought into the myth, and believed it was in my power to manage my affairs so that I could be assured of salvation in spite of my wealth compared the rest of the people in God's creation.

And don't we all fall into that trap? Don't we all look for ways around it whenever Jesus says something that seems too difficult for us to bear? I think it's easy to identify with the rich young man as he walked away disappointed, he thought he was so good, and because Jesus' call to discipleship was more intense and serious than he ever thought. It kind of shocks you, when you've made it that far, when you think you're doing so well in being righteous, and have so much to give, that it hurts to think of letting it go.

But though it may seem that way, it's not actually easier when you start small. It just takes longer to understand. But when you start early, you have longer to enjoy the result of the lesson. I started small. My parents taught me from my earliest time of having my own money, that I needed to tithe, that is, give 10% to the church first, before I spent the rest on anything else. At first it was 30 cents of my \$3 allowance, and I could just feel the

candy being taken from me, as I plunked it in the plate.

Later in life putting in a whole dollar, of the 10 I earned from mowing a lawn, seemed like such a big deal, and when I made a ton of money, like Christmas presents totalling \$200, putting in \$20 just seemed like a fortune thrown away!

God was working on me all that time though, so by the time I got done with college, and began for the first time really supporting myself, and making a living, I was almost ready to tithe on a salary. I say almost, because it seemed like a big amount, even at \$45 a week. At that time, I read an economist though, whom I respected, and who wasn't a Christian. He had some very convincing things to say, about how to make the world better. He said that Americans could afford to give away 20% of their individual income, still live a comfortable life and make tremendous difference at home and abroad.

Suddenly God's standard of the tithe seemed small, and I started to understand the tithe as the beginning of giving, not the end goal. I started to understand that God desires 10%, of the first fruits of our labor, to go to the church, for the community of faith is where our hearts belong first. And there will still be a need, to give more to help others.

Sure enough, as I started to give my tithe from my first job outside of college, it became a joy to me. And it wasn't just the giving that was a joy, it was the experience of that church community. My heart became a part of them, a part of the Episcopal church, and I found my life enriched as I became more and more involved in God's work in His church.

When Jackie and I met she believed in giving, but was not onboard yet about the tithe. But then, she was not raised in a Christian home, and she lived most of her Christian life in Rhode Island, which has the worst per capita giving rate of any diocese in the country, in spite of being one of the wealthiest places to live.

So she hadn't heard much about good stewardship in church there. Part of our courtship involved talking about this, until we were on the same page. And after we were married, when we tithed on our combined income, she started to understand the blessing of putting your treasure where your heart is.

One of the biggest blessings we experienced was shortly after Eva Jane was born. Jackie was working full-time, while I was studying full-time. And Eva Jane stopped gaining weight. Our baby not thriving was alarming to us, but because we had been trusting God with our treasure, we found it easy to sense that the step we were being asked to make, involved trusting Him more. We decided the best thing to do, was to have Jackie quit her

job to stay home with Eva Jane, even though we weren't sure how we would get by without her income while I was studying full-time. God blessed us, in part through helping me find weekend work waiting tables, and in part through ways we still don't understand. But we always had more than enough. And we were amazed at God's grace.

There were many times in seminary, where we didn't think we had enough for groceries, and basic utilities, but we continued to tithe on what we had, and we rejoiced many times not just once, but many times, as we experienced God coming through for us, with gifts and blessings that we had not foreseen, just in time for us to never be seriously in want.

Our needs were provided for, and we became more committed to this Biblical standard. Since seminary, and as our children have become a bigger part of our lives, there have come many times when we were tempted to cut into our tithing, and provide more for our children. But we have striven to remain faithful, and each time it seemed that we wouldn't have enough, at the end of the month, because of the tithe made at the beginning the money has been there, even when provided through temporary mistakes others have made.

There was one time when we were just getting adjusted to the new expenses of a new living situation, and I went into our checking account and was dismayed to find out that we were about to be overdrawn by about the same amount as our tithe that had come out early in the month. Our next paycheck wouldn't come for a few days, and I felt stuck. I prayed about this, turning to God, more than a little annoyed, and was surprised the next day to go into work, and find a check for the exact amount in my mailbox.

By the time I figured out the error over the weekend, that because of a clerical error I had been reimbursed too much, I was able to write a check and reimburse my employer, after my regular pay had been deposited, and avoid the overdraft fees! God wouldn't let our tithe be the result of our not having enough.

But it's not just about having enough at the end of the month. Our tithing has begun to change our hearts too. There have been times of course, when we have made mistakes in our own spending, when we've spent too much, and accumulated debt, and even times when we had to pay overdraft fees, because we messed up our own monthly expenses. Life is not perfect, and we certainly are not, but our commitment to God in our tithe, has led us to see that living that close to our means and not beyond them, makes us more aware of God's blessings and more aware of the priority of our giving - our 10% to God first.

If we were padding our savings and giving from what was left over, I don't think we would ever find that the right proportion for God remained. Our tithe has often been an invest-

ment of faith.

I went to Columbia College in New York in the 1990's. Those were boomtimes, and many of my fraternity brothers went on to become investment bankers, Wall Street Traders, corporate lawyers, and consultants. Some of them were making millions in bonuses each year even before they turned thirty.

I thought of them as wealthy people, and thought that I had voluntarily given up a life of wealth, in the service of others, when I went to work in the nonprofit sector. I thought I was choosing the hard way and giving up those lucrative fields for the good of others. I have come to see that I chose an easier path, for it was not as hard to see God's blessings when things have come to me as I have needed them, rather than because I hoarded money and things in fear of not having enough.

Truly as Jesus said, we have received houses, (we've always had a good place to live,) and brothers and sisters, (each new church has brought us new Christian family) and of course our children, and other's children have been blessings in our lives and fields, the future has seemed wide open to me, full of possibilities for fulfilling work, as long as I have trusted in God with my first fruits.

I see the work we've been doing, and our tithing, as the best kind of investment. Even if we can't afford to invest in life insurance or other long term savings, we're investing in eternal life insurance, that is, we're storing up treasures in heaven. The drawback of understanding this, and thinking in that way, is that I started to resent the wealthy people I knew and lived with. When I was tithing to that first church community, and living among some of the wealthiest people in this country, just outside of New York City. I discovered that my paltry pledge was higher than most of the pledges in the church. I was renting a room in an apartment, and these people were living in multi-million dollar homes! First I was angry, then disappointed, and I was then awed with thinking about how much more we could do, if the others in the church started to give their fair share.

I started to feel superior to these wealthy people, but that temptation to judgment got shot down, the first time I heard the statistics that Corky Carlisle told us in his presentation in Sunday School. He described briefly the proportions of personal wealth around the world, how wealthy you are if you have a little money in your wallet, a small salary, and basic checking account, common statistics you can find readily, and when I had heard those numbers, I realized I was one of the wealthiest people in the world, and I could do a lot more, to realize the kingdom of God in the lives of others.

You see, getting back to the camel and needle thing, it was so shocking to the disciples, who had given much to follow Jesus, because the disciples realized that they had more than enough, and that by the camel and needle perspective it would be impossible even for them poor as they were, to enter the kingdom of heaven. Unfortunately the man who had approached Jesus with his question about how to inherit the kingdom, left before Jesus could give him some hope.

An early Jewish Midrash writes: “The Holy One said, open for me a door as big as a needle's eye, and I will open for you a door through which may enter tents and camels.” The needle's eye was considered equal to the smallest opening, and camels the biggest land animal around. So fitting a camel through the needle's eye, was a synonym for impossibility. It is impossible for anyone to even try. But for God, just the tiniest crack, in the door to a person's heart, will allow God to send in the whole herd, and set up an oasis of joy.

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” so the door to our hearts is through our treasure, and if we open that door just a fraction of the way, a mere 10%, and God will be able to rush in with the blessings he wants us to enjoy.

I'm just beginning to understand this, just as I am beginning to see myself as wealthy among the people of the world. With my tithe I'm beginning to open the door to God, and I've already begun to experience the abundance of his blessing pouring in. I want that for you as well.

Giving 10% to God in His church, is like giving God the eye of a needle to work with, like letting him get the toe of his foot in the door of your life. God can get a camel through the eye of the needle, and more, but the wider you open the door, the more you participate in the kingdom of heaven, right here, right now.

Teach your children to tithe early. I'm grateful to my parents for teaching me, and I know it's a long process to learn to walk against the teachings of the world, and they need to begin learning it early.

The Message version of the Bible says the rich man went away from Jesus with a heavy heart, because, “He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go.” Begin to let go, of the things you're holding onto, and Let God show you what He can do. When your heart is open to Him.