**Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost**

**October 17, 2021**

**Text—Mark 10:23-31**

What does it mean for God to bless you? We talk about God blessing people all the time, but what does that really mean? For instance, whenever somebody sneezes, the polite thing to do for many people is to say, “God bless you.” Why do we do that? Well, sneezing is often a sign of illness, so back in the day, people would wish God’s blessings upon a person who sneezed, so that they would get better. Nowadays we just kind of say that as a reflex, but ultimately what we are doing is asking for God to grant good health to a person. That’s what it means for God to bless you: that he makes you healthy and does not allow you to get sick.

What are some other things that we would typically associate with God’s blessings? Probably a lot of the things covered by the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Luther in his Catechism described “daily bread” as being anything that is necessary to support our bodies and lives. So food, drink, house, family, money, cars, good weather, good government, good neighbors, and all of those kinds of things. We would consider a person who has everything they need to be blessed by God. We would consider a family where everyone gets along and is healthy to be blessed by God. We would consider a community or a country that is peaceful and prosperous to be blessed by God. If God has blessed you, that means that things are generally going well for you, and you have little to complain about in your life.

That’s why it’s very interesting that in today’s Gospel text, Jesus seems to turn this conventional wisdom on its head by his comments about who can or cannot be saved. A little bit of context is in order here. Right before Jesus’ words in this text, a rich young man had come up to him, knelt at his feet, and asked him what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him that he knew the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother. The young man proudly responded that he had kept all of these commandments since he was a boy. But Jesus then said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” At this point, the rich young man went away sad, because he had many possessions, and presumably he did not want to part with them.

This is where our text picks up. After this encounter with the rich young man, Jesus told his disciples, “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.” Most of us have heard these words of Jesus before, so perhaps they don’t have the kind of impact on us that they should. But to the disciples, this was an amazing thing for Jesus to say. Think about this: Jesus was saying that the people who appeared to have the greatest blessings from God were actually the ones who would have the toughest time making it into the kingdom of heaven. It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person who has wealth to enter the kingdom. This was so contrary to the prevailing worldview of the time that it was absolutely astonishing to the disciples. How could Jesus say something like that? Wealthy people had clearly been blessed greatly by God. Why would he give them such blessings now and then turn around and reject them in the next life? It didn’t make any sense to them.

But perhaps it should have. Think about it: the whole point of Jesus’ ministry was to come and save his people. He had come to save them from the enemies that oppressed them: sin, death, and the devil. The disciples didn’t fully understand this quite yet, of course, but they still thought that the Christ was supposed to be a Savior. They thought that maybe he would save his people of Israel from the Romans and restore their independence and prosperity. Either way, God’s people needed to be saved. But if you don’t feel like you need to be saved, then you’re not going to be particularly receptive to someone who shows up claiming he’s there to save you. And those who don’t think they need to be saved are the ones who feel like they have everything they need. If you’re wealthy, you can afford pretty much whatever you want and buy your way out of whatever trouble might happen. And if you’re wealthy, there’s a good chance you got there because you made smart decisions and investments, which might make you feel like you are self-made and self-reliant. If you can handle things perfectly fine on your own, why would you need God? Why would you need a Savior when you don’t have anything to be saved from? Of course, all people are afflicted by sin, death, and the devil, but it’s easy to lose sight of that when things are going well for you. So wealth, far from being a blessing, could actually be a curse in that it gives you the illusion that you are in control and can handle things yourself. And if you don’t feel like you need a Savior, Jesus is not going to be particularly appealing to you, and thus you will miss the chance he offers you to enter the kingdom of God through faith in him.

Also, as we see in the story of the rich young man, having great possessions can cause a person to fear losing them more than fearing God or desiring to obey his commands. Sometimes being a Christian requires sacrifices. For the rich young man, he would have had to sell his possessions and give to the poor so he could follow Jesus. For us, it might look different. It might involve taking a worse paying job so we can be at church on Sunday mornings. It might involve sacrificing athletic, extracurricular, or social opportunities in order to come to midweek and receive instruction about the things of God. Or it might involve leaving a job where you are pressured to conform to the world’s views of contemporary moral issues that conflict with what the Scriptures teach. Regardless, if you are too attached to your money, possessions, friends, activities, or anything else other than God, you run the risk of being pulled away from him and from his church. Those who have much are afraid to lose what they have, while those who have little have little to lose. Once again, the things that we thought were blessings could turn out to be curses if they get in between us and the worship of the true God. They are certainly blessings in and of themselves, but they can become idols when we cling to them more tightly than we cling to God and his promises to us.

So that’s why Jesus would say it is so difficult for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. In so doing, he turned the conventional wisdom of the world on its head and showed us that things are not always as they seem. The disciples, meanwhile, were very confused and concerned about this. If not even the ones that God had blessed so greatly could be saved, then who could? So they asked Jesus about it. He responded to them, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” God specializes in accomplishing impossible things. He created the entire world out of nothing with just his Word, he parted the Red Sea so his people could cross on dry ground, and he made fire rain from the sky on the enemies of Israel. Jesus himself did many impossible things: he turned water into wine, calmed storms on the sea, walked on water, healed diseases and cast out demons with a word, and raised the dead. All of these things are impossible for mere human beings, but not for God, and not for his Son Jesus either. And if Jesus can do such impossible things, then he can make a camel go through the eye of a needle. And he can make a wealthy person enter the kingdom of God as well. Ultimately, though the wealthy have their own particular obstacles to entering the kingdom, every person, no matter how much money he has, still has the problem of sin. Really, the root cause of all of these issues is sin, and what Jesus says about wealthy people in this text could be applied to anybody. “How difficult it is for a sinner to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a sinner to enter the kingdom of God.”

But what Jesus also says about wealthy people in this text is true of all sinners as well: “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.” Jesus proved that this was true, that he could do impossible things, and then he did the most impossible thing of all: he made us sinners righteous. He lived a perfect life in the midst of this sinful world (another impossibility!), and then he willingly went to the cross and sacrificed himself to atone for our sins. He stood in our place and accomplished everything we could not, all so that he could exchange his righteousness for our sinfulness and then take the penalty for that sinfulness. We sinful people have thus been declared to be righteous for Jesus’ sake. The impossible has been accomplished: the sinner has been made righteous. And now all sinners who trust in Jesus, no matter how much wealth they have, can receive his blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Those are the true blessings of God: not earthly wealth or possessions, but rather the eternal gifts of Jesus that give us everlasting life in his kingdom. His impossible resurrection from the dead has ensured that all who trust in him will rise as well, and that we will enjoy eternity in his presence forever. All things are indeed possible with God, and that means that all of us here today, regardless of our financial status, have been given a path to enter his kingdom.

That’s not to say that we can simply breathe a sigh of relief and ignore what Jesus says in our text about those who have wealth. Not at all! Some of us in this room are wealthier than others, but all of us here today have great wealth compared to the poorest people of the world. All of us need to be reminded of what Jesus says in our text. We all need to remember that we can become confident in our own ability to take care of ourselves and feel like we don’t need Jesus or his salvation. We all need to remember that we can become too attached to our possessions and make idols of them, and thus fall away from worshiping the true God. But most importantly of all, we need to remember that God does impossible things, even things as impossible as bringing us wealthy sinners into his eternal kingdom. He does not hold our sins against us, but rather forgives them and makes a place for us, unworthy though we may be. We do not have to leave him sorrowful as the rich young man did, because we know that he has the ultimate blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation in store for us. In the face of these blessings, we will gladly give up anything material that we have in this life, because we know that it doesn’t come close to comparing with the riches of God’s grace in his kingdom. Instead of being sorrowful, therefore, we will rejoice! We know that we need a Savior, but more than that, we know that we have a Savior who by his mercy brings us unworthy sinners into the kingdom of God. Amen.