

Proper 23, Year B – *The Hard Saying about Camels*

*Mark 10:17-31*

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

There's a book that's been around for a number of years called *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Its purpose is to justify things in the Bible that are really tough for modern folks to accept – like, for example, God's order to the Israelites who entered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua to wipe out everyone and everything in their new land, men, women and children alike. There is a later, companion, volume called *Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Well, I'd say that today's Gospel passage about the rich man who wants to be assured of eternal life is one that many of us would consider a Hard Saying indeed. There are some, in fact, who would prefer to ignore it altogether.

I got to talking with a friend a couple of years back, when the subject of religion came up – as it seems frequently to do with me. She told me how excited she had been to find a website for the church run by Joel Osteen, complete with streaming video of his services. So who's Joel Osteen? You may have seen one or more of his best-selling books – the best known of which is probably *Your Best Life Now*. Or you might remember him from the news a few years ago, when he bought the coliseum that the Houston Rockets had been using for their NBA home games in order to convert it into the home of his Lakewood Church – a true megamega church with nearly 40,000 members.

Now it obviously has something to do with my church background – and probably my psyche as well – but I have to admit that churches that seat multi-thousands swaying to the beat of very loud rock music make me very nervous indeed. Frankly, the emotional nature of the experience just reminds me just a bit too much of the Leni Riefenstahl film of the Nazi Nuremberg rally of 1936. Now don't get me wrong! I'm *not* trying to suggest that Osteen's church bears any similarity to the Nazis, or Osteen to Hitler, but I do believe that there is something dangerously powerful in the emotionality of a religious or political experience couched in the ambiance of a rock concert – the individual swallowed up in a throng of thousands of worshipful followers of one charismatic leader, whatever his message may be.

And Osteen's message gave me real pause. It made me wonder whether he had ever read a Gospel passage like the one we heard here this morning. On the Lakewood website you can find a synopsis of their beliefs. Most of them are your basic fundamentalist beliefs – like the inerrancy of scriptures and salvation by belief in Jesus' sacrifice. But one tenet deserves to be read aloud:

**WE BELIEVE...as children of God, we are overcomers and more than conquerors and God intends for each of us to experience the abundant life He has in store for us.**

I don't know how many of you are old enough to remember my *favorite* of the old-time radio preachers who were the predecessors of the televangelists who have given our culture so much to have fun with. This gentleman was a Black preacher, who just died a couple of months ago. He was truly unlike any other of the Black preachers we might think of recent years – Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson, or Al Sharpton. He was called Reverend Ike. Back in the 60s and 70s you could hear him over wide swaths of America over hundreds of radio stations, though the station I used to listen to him on when I lived in California was one of those super-powerful Mexican stations, XERB, that were just over the border so that they could put out a signal much stronger than American stations were allowed to have.

Reverend Ike would rub currency between his hands and declaim on how beautiful the color green was. He liked to remind the parishioners in his studio audience that when the collection was taken up he didn't want to hear the clink of any coins. His point, frankly, was not really different from Osteen's, or any number of other preachers of a religion of prosperity who extol the fact that proper belief in the Bible's message – especially that Jesus has come to give us a more abundant life – means that we need not be shy about our desires for more worldly goods. God *wants* us to be rich! One of his most famous quotations was: "The best thing you can do for the poor is not be one of them." That's consistent with his adaptation of one of the Bible's best-known precepts. "It's the lack of money," Rev. Ike put it, not "the love of money," "that's the root of all evil." I think we can all agree that there is a measure of truth in that observation. We need only to look to the lives of our brothers who still live in the Sudan, for example. As a way of emphasizing his point, however, the good reverend himself lived in a mansion and had a fleet of mink-seated Rolls Royces, a different color for each day of the week.

Now, look, I can certainly understand the attractiveness of that message, even the value of that message to folks without anything, though I find it hard to reconcile with the lives, and deaths, of most of Jesus' closest disciples after his own death. This line of thinking is in a long tradition of books and tapes associated with such well-known purveyors of prosperity as Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller, the Unity Church and the Church of Religious Science. This whole approach to our religion is, *frankly*, a form of magical thinking. The founder of Religious Science, Ernest Holmes, taught that if prayer is prayed in a *scientific* manner, you are using principles that *will* produce the results you're after – because it *is* a science. It's not really different, then, from the process of putting money into a vending machine. So long as you put in the right amount, and put it into the right slot, and what you want is *in* the machine, you *have* to get it. It's a *law* that you are applying. And knowing that law permits you to get whatever you're after. *You*, not

God, are in charge. I once knew a woman who proudly announced that using scientific prayer always got her a parking space at the supermarket or theater.

I *do* understand the attractiveness of these teachings. They just aren't consistent with the Gospels that I have read – most particularly the one we heard this morning about the man who “went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” By the world's standards we here today are undoubtedly among the most prosperous and comfortable of all the world's inhabitants. So, I guess if we want to *truly* become Jesus' disciples we ought to live more like the world's poor. Are we really wrong if we prefer to stay in our homes and live as we have been living? I'm afraid I can't really answer that question for me, let alone for you. Let's remember that we aren't perfect. But, if there is anything to these Gospel readings, if we're *really* supposed to pay attention to what Jesus is recorded as having said, if the rich really have a more difficult time of it by Jesus' standards – maybe we need to rethink advice that tells us that Jesus really wants us to be rich.

So what is this morning's Gospel reading really getting at? It is pretty clearly contrasting a life of true discipleship, devoted to following Christ, with one in which the things of this world take precedence. It's telling us, just as Jesus told that rich man, described in another Gospel as a rich young ruler, that when the time comes when we are called to follow Christ, *anything* that pulls us back towards this world – even one's family – is a distraction from what God would have us do. And to live a life in which priority is given to position, wealth, power and the like is to establish another God in our God's place.

That's why a message like Osteen's misses the point of the Gospels. No, we don't have to give everything away to be faithful Christians and Jesus' disciples, but remember Paul's admonition that the “The love of money is the root of all evil.” It's tough for that rich man to whom Jesus speaks because his *love* of his possessions is greater than his love of Jesus and his desire to enter the “Kingdom of God.” It isn't what we *have* that makes us Jesus' disciples. It's what we do with what we have, since, after all, *everything* we have is merely on loan from *God* – from whom *all* things come.

If we are truly to follow Jesus, at the very least we must be ready to lay aside those goals that clearly establish us as looking to *this* world for our standards of success. When we hear his call, material things are nothing but a hindrance. When Jesus called his first disciples, they followed without question, and without hesitation. Should *we* really do less?

**AMEN**