

Date: October 20, 2024 (22nd Sunday after Pentecost // Proper 24, Series B)

Title: “Testing Your Grip”

Text: Mark 10:23-31

²³Jesus looked round and said to His disciples, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’

²⁴The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus said again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’

²⁶The disciples were exceedingly astonished, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’

²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.’

Have you ever done a “grip test”? I learned about this a number of years ago—that apparently, the strength with which you can grip something (with your hands), is a pretty good *indicator* of your current health status. Even more, it’s also a pretty good *predictor* of your *future* health status! According to public-health authorities, there are significant correlations between *low* grip-strength and future health problems including “all-cause mortality... [a number of] disease-specific mortalit[ies]... bone-mineral density... fractures and falls... cognition and depression... and problems associated with hospitalization.”¹

So, “get a grip,” eh! Whatever we’re able to do to *increase* our grip-strength seems to be pretty important in improving both the length and the quality of our life.

There is, however, one big exception. As Jesus says in today’s Gospel reading, having too strong of a grip on the things of this world is *terrible* for our *spiritual* health. It’s such a danger, in fact, that he warns us about it *twice*. First, Jesus says, “**How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.**” (v.23) Then he tells his disciples again, “**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.**” (25)

The disciples’ response to both of those warnings is fascinating. The first time, Mark tells us “**the disciples were amazed at Jesus’s words.**” (24) The second time, he says “**they were exceedingly astonished, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’**” (26) Both of those responses suggest that those disciples *understood* that correlation Jesus was telling them about—between having a tight grip on *things*, and spiritual mortality. “If you’re right, Jesus” (they’re basically saying), “we’re all doomed!” (“**Who then, can be saved?**”)

I suspect many of us probably feel the same. We’ve worked hard to accumulate however much wealth it is we now enjoy. Some of us have quite a lot; others, not so much. But as far as I know, all of us here in this congregation have a roof over our head... food on our table... clothes on our back... and at least some form of regular income. By global standards, that means we’re doing pretty well. By historic standards, pretty much all of us modern-day Canadians truly *are* “**rich.**”

Last Sunday’s Gospel centred on a parable Jesus told about “**a certain rich man**” whose land produced such an “**abundant harvest**” that he said to himself, “**What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops!**” So he decided to “**tear down his barns and build bigger ones,**” and say to himself, “**You have plenty of grain set-aside for many years: Take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry!**” (Luke 12:16-19) I didn’t talk about that reading at all, last week. But as I’ve been thinking and praying about today’s Gospel, the connections are pretty obvious.

¹ Richard W. Bohannon, “Grip Strength: An Indispensable Biomarker for Older Adults.” *Clinical Interventions in Aging* 14 (2019), 1681-1691.

That farmer in that parable sounds like he's got it made, right? He's maxed out his RRSP, his TFSA is full, and he's still got enough extra cash in his chequing account to make some new, non-registered investments. That's exactly what the world encourages us all to aim for, right?—bigger barns, fatter bank-accounts, and so much **“set aside for many years”** that we too can **“take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry.”** So when Jesus turns around at the end of that parable and has *God* say to that man, **“You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you: Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?”**—well, you and I probably feel like deer in the headlights, right? (Luke 12:20) And when Jesus goes on to say, **“That's how it will be with anyone who store up things for themselves but is not rich toward God”** (Luke 12:21)—well, maybe that's the point where *we too* become **“exceedingly astonished”** and want to ask, **“Who then can be saved?”** (Mark 10:26)

In both of these readings, you see (last week's Gospel and today's), Jesus is attacking the accumulation of wealth that lies at the very heart of our economic system. And most of us have bought into that system and spent a good part of our life trying to become rich. So of course it's jarring, uncomfortable, and downright threatening to some of our longest-held, deepest-rooted assumptions to hear Jesus tell us both of these things, here in today's Gospel: first, **“How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God,”** and then, **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.”** (23, 25) Why on earth would Jesus say such radical things, anyway?

Two reasons.

The first reason is purely practical. Jesus wants to spare us from the frustration and futility of *endlessly* chasing after wealth. Maybe you've heard about the time somebody supposedly asked John D. Rockefeller, “How much money is enough?” Rockefeller was the world's first billionaire, and at one point, was apparently worth about 1% of the entire US economy.² Do you know how Rockefeller answered that question (“How much money is enough?”)? **“Just a little bit more,”** he said: **“Just a little bit more!”**

That's the kind of *grasping* that not only Jesus but the whole biblical tradition wants to spare us from. Maybe you noticed the same kind of warning echoing through our first reading, from Ecclesiastes chapter 5.

- In the opening verse of that reading: **“Whoever loves *money* never has enough; whoever loves *wealth* is never satisfied with their income.”** (Eccl 5:10)
- Half-way through: **“I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners.”** (Eccl 5:13)
- And then again, a third time: **“Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take *nothing* from their toil that they can carry in their hands.”** (Eccl 5:15)

That last bit especially (about the hands) loops us back to this business about our grip. Physically, having a strong grip is a good thing that's linked to many positive outcomes, here and now and in the future. But it's the opposite when it comes to wealth. In *that* part of life, the more tightly we hold onto our wealth, the *worse-off* we are, in terms of our spiritual well-being. Again, as Jesus said in last Sunday's Gospel, **“Watch out, and be on your guard against all kinds of greed. Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”** (Luke 12:15)

Realistically: It's true that *up to a certain point*, having more possessions *does indeed* make a person happier and more content. That's just common sense, right? It's *hard* to be happy or content when you *don't* have a roof over your head, food on your table, and clothes on your back.

² Stats: Shreveport Times, Dec. 10, 2017 (<https://www.shreveporttimes.com/story/news/local/blogs/2017/12/10/how-much-money-enough/930449001/>)

That's why Jesus invites us to pray every day that God will *give us* enough of all those kinds of "daily bread." We need what we need, in order to live! Jesus himself understands and fully accepts that reality.

On the other hand, having enough *is* enough!—not just practically, but spiritually too. That's what Jesus is really getting at, every time he talks about wealth, riches, and possessions. Jesus sees (even more clearly than we do) how badly our tendency to "grab onto *more* than enough" *messes up* our relationship with God. And three times in a row, in today's Gospel reading, he talks about "**entering the Kingdom of God.**" Three times in a row, he recognizes how hard it is to do that.

- First he says, "**How hard it is [in particular] for those who have wealth, to enter the Kingdom of God.**" (23)
- Then, he backs away a little, and makes a more general statement: "**Children, how hard it is [for anyone] to enter the kingdom of God.**" (24)
- Then, he pivots back to wealth once again: "**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.**" (25)

The problem is, you see, "**the kingdom of God**" is *different from* "the kingdom of this world." There's some overlap, in the sense that "**the kingdom of God**" has already started to *break into* this world. When the Pharisees asked Jesus once, "**when the kingdom of God would come,**" he told them that the kingdom of God is not something about which they could say, "**Here it is! or There it is!**" The Kingdom of God, in other words, is not something *outward* or *visible* like a commune, or political party, or even a church building. It's certainly not like wealth in your bank account! *No*, Jesus said, "**The kingdom of God is among you.**" (Luke 17:20-21) It's dispersed, scattered-around, here and there, hidden. Another time too, he told his disciples something similar: "**Wherever two or three gather together in my name, there am I, in their midst.**" (Matt 18:20)

What those two sayings together are telling us is that the Kingdom of God has already started to arrive, wherever Christians gather together *around* Jesus. *This* is the kingdom of God, right here!—not this building, nor the structure of this congregation, but what we *do* here together, with Jesus in our midst. He speaks to us here, through his Word... he forgives our sins and feeds our faith, in his Supper... he embraces us with his own love, in the love we have for one another. We pray every day (in the Lord's Prayer) that God would *make* his Kingdom come!—well, gatherings like this one are part of the Lord's own *answer* to that prayer. On the one hand: *No*, as Jesus told the Roman governor Pilate toward the end of his life, his kingdom is "**not of this world!**" (John 18:36). And yet, on the other hand: look around!—as he told those Pharisees a little earlier, his kingdom truly *is* here, "**among us!**" (Luke 17:21)

The problem is, "**the prince of this world**" is not at all happy about any of this. (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11) His goal is to *undermine* the kingdom of God, here on earth—distracting us from all of its benefits, contradicting all of its claims, and keeping us all locked-up in his miserable little kingdom instead. And one of the best tools "**the prince of this world**" has, for doing all of that is—guess what?—*wealth*.

- Who needs the kingdom of God, when we can already be the kings and queens of our own little principalities?
- Who needs "pie in the sky, by and by," when we've already got more pie than we can ever possibly eat, right here in front of us?
- Why should we *long for* the kingdom of God, when all we have to do is tap our card, write out a cheque, or type in some data on a website, to buy pretty much anything in the whole wide world that any human being could ever possibly long for?

Is it starting to make sense to you now, *why* Jesus says what he does, in today's Gospel? "*Keep your eyes on the prize,*" is what he's really telling us. It's *so easy* for us who are rich, to lose

sight of that prize!—by worshiping the creation more than the Creator... placing more value on what is temporary, than what is eternal... focussing more on what feeds and pleases the body right now, than on what feeds and pleases the soul forever. Our own experience confirms the wisdom of Jesus's words: **“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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”**

Thankfully, though, Jesus does *not* say that it's *impossible* to enter the kingdom of God! **“With man,”** he says, **“it is impossible.”** (27) Wealth, in that sense, is only *one* of the things that get in the way. We want to be *independent*, right? We're hard-wired from infancy onward to call our own shots, make our own decisions, and rule over our own little kingdoms like absolute dictators. *That's* the *real* barrier we're up against; wealth is only one of the bricks in that wall. Some of us get “stuck on” our brain-power, as a way of asserting our independence from God. Or our good character. Or our good works. There are *so many things* we cling to, that make it **“impossible”** for us to enter the kingdom of God.

I've heard about a method of trapping monkeys that illustrates all of this pretty well. Apparently, if you put some food into a container that has a hole in it that's just barely big enough for a monkey to wiggle his hand into, that monkey will grab onto that food and grip it so tightly that they won't let go even when the “hunter” (or scientist, or whoever it is that's set that trap) comes by to collect them and take him away as a prisoner. Isn't that sad?³

I don't know if that's actually *true* or not when it comes to monkeys, but in terms of our relationship with riches, many of us can probably say, “Yeah, that's about right.” It's fine for us to want stuff, and it's fine for us to have stuff—up to the point that we “grasp it so tightly” that it entraps us. At that point, we voluntarily turn *ourselves* into prisoners and *allow* the Adversary to capture us. That's how sin so often works.

As Jesus says, **“With man, it is impossible”** to enter the kingdom of God. **“But not with God! All things are possible with God.”** (27) The Lord himself has *plenty* of ability to “loosen our grip” on *everything* other than himself and his kingdom.

- Maybe we still *have* wealth: but when the Lord brings us into his kingdom, he gives us a new perspective and a new spirit—so we don't *cling to* that wealth anymore, and let it entrap us.
- Maybe we're still *smart*: but as the Holy Spirit shapes and humbles us, we don't worship our own intelligence anymore. Instead, we learn to ask, “Lord, what would *you* have us do? Where is *your* wisdom leading us?”

Wealth, intelligence, and (for that matter) every other good gift God gives—all of them are excellent servants! The reason God places them into our hands in such abundance is because he wants us to *use* them as our servants, to meet our needs and to bless the whole world.

We only just need to make sure that God's gifts *remain* our servants, and do not become our masters. That is when their character starts to “flip”—from blessing to curse, from tool to chain, from something we *grip onto* for a positive purpose, to something we *grasp* in a way that entraps us.

It's time for us all to “test our grip.” What are we *really* “hanging onto”? As St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, **“I pray that out of the riches of God's glory, he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”** (Eph 3:16-17) He is our true treasure, now and forever! In the name of Jesus, dear friends: AMEN.

³ Among many online versions, see Oliver Burkeman, “Don't Get Caught in the Monkey Trap,” *The Guardian*, 14 Nov 2014 (<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/14/how-to-avoid-monkey-trap-oliver-burkeman>).