

Funny Enough: Did You Hear the One About the Camel and the Eye of the Needle?

Mark 10:17-31

Missions Sunday, October 11, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † Did you know that the recession, apparently, is funny? I didn't either, until I came home from Youth Group on Wednesday night, flopped on the couch, and turned on the TV. ABC, it turns out, has risked offending those of us who think the recession is anything but humorous by offering on Wednesday nights two new comedies about families struggling with money.
- † The first prime time effort, "Hank," stars veteran Kelsey Grammer of "Frasier" fame. He plays Hank Pryor, a business tycoon who is laid off and has to downsize his lifestyle to be like the rest of us. Hank ran a chain of 170 sporting goods stores. He was a workaholic who didn't have time for his family.
- † After being fired, he has to leave the good life behind and move back to his wife's small hometown and a small, run-down home. He not only has to learn to be humble, he has to get to know his family again, including his wife's annoying small-town relatives.
- † Then there is "In the Middle," starring Patricia Heaton of "Everybody Loves Raymond." Heaton plays Frankie, an overworked mom forced by economic conditions to work at a demeaning job as a used car salesperson where her boss constantly puts her down.
- † Frankie and her family are not even barely getting by, even though they are trying to make it all work in their quirky ways. In

- Wednesday's episode, the dryer breaks down, and with no money to fix it or buy a new one, they are forced to drop by neighbors' homes with a basket of wet laundry to impose. The hapless daughter needs glasses, and they resort to a second-hand dollar store for an ugly pair.
- † This, you say, is FUNNY? It would be like retelling today's troubling and uncomfortable scripture lesson as a joke: "Did you hear the one about the camel and the eye of the needle?" Heaven knows this story is anything BUT funny. It makes us squirm—at least it always makes me uneasy, especially having to preach it.
 - † For we are people who could qualify as having many possessions, like the earnest young man in the scripture story. Even if we aren't rich, we seek the good life, we like pretty things, we enjoy good food, we want more toys—a new or at least remodeled house, a new horse, a different car—you know what you want.
 - † And yet Jesus wants us to sell everything we own and give it to the poor? Come on, we think—This is not funny. In fact it would be like a getting a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Almost impossible.
 - † Unless, of course, God were involved. I have a confession to make: when the Finance Committee several months ago planned our annual stewardship campaign for this month, I did not intend for it to coincide with a month in which we also focus on missions.
 - † But I do believe that God had something to do with how both emphases came together at the same time. Funny, isn't it? For what God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, wanted the man with many possessions to consider in today's lesson was this: "What is your life purpose?"

- † As Adam Hamilton says in his book Enough, “What is your life about? Why do you exist? Do you exist simply to consume as much as you can and get as much pleasure as you can while you are here on this earth, or do you have a higher purpose?”
- † How do you understand your life purpose—your vision or mission or calling? And are you spending your money in ways that are consistent with this life purpose? The answers to these questions are very important.”
- † He goes on to say that by default, our society tells us that our life purpose is to consume—to make as much money as possible and to blow as much money as possible. But surely we know that cannot be right.
- † Remember God’s call to Abraham? In the twelfth chapter of Genesis, God essentially says, “Abraham, I’ve chosen you, and I’m going to bless you. I’m going to make your name great. And I’m going to increase your descendents so that they will be a great nation.
- † I will bless you so that you might be a blessing to all the nations of the earth.” Like Abraham, we are blessed to be a blessing to others. Our purpose in life is not our own pleasure, as the young man in today’s scripture lesson thought. The playwright George Bernard Shaw said it this way in the Epistle Dedicatory in *Man and Superman*:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

- † God created us to care for God’s creation. God created us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. God created us to care for our families and for those in need. God created us to glorify God, to seek justice, and do mercy.
- † To be a Christian is to follow Jesus Christ and to seek to do his will in our lives. It is to say, “Here I am, all of me! I’m yours. Put me to work, help me to serve, use me to accomplish your work.”
- † And if this is our life purpose, then our money and possessions should be devoted to helping us fulfill this calling. We are meant to use our resources to help care for our families and others—to serve Christ and the world through the church, missions, and everyday opportunities. In other words, we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.
- † I wish I could say that this next story was my own, but it’s a great story told by a motivational speaker named Barbara Glanz. One day she was talking at an event for the employees of a grocery store chain. She talked to them about how they saw their life purpose, suggesting that their work was more than stocking shelves or ringing up purchases or making deliveries.
- † She told them that every person they met was an opportunity to bless someone, to live out a higher calling or mission. The employees were inspired by her words, including one nineteen-year-old grocery bagger named Johnny.
- † And Johnny, who has Down syndrome, took her words to heart. He went home and tried to think of ways he could be a blessing to others. Finally he came up with a plan. Each night we would search the internet for a positive saying that would encourage people.

- † Then he would print out 300 copies and carefully cut the sayings into individual strips. The next day, he would put one of the sayings in the grocery bag of each of his customers while saying, “I put a saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming here.”
- † A month later, the manager noticed that Johnny’s line was much longer than the others. Even when he announced that there was no waiting in lines 2 and 3, no one budged. People wanted Johnny to be their bag boy. He touched them and filled them with hope. Johnny got it. He was pursuing a mission that was bigger than his personal satisfaction.
- † And so Johnny’s example causes us to ask ourselves: “Are we pursuing a mission that is bigger than our personal satisfaction? Can we articulate that mission and its relationship to our faith? And does the allocation of our time and money reflect that mission?”
- † These are big questions, but there is no better place to ask and answer them than in our church. Beginning the 18th of this month, Lynn Nagel will continue his Sunday morning class using the principles embodied in scripture, as outlined in Adam Hamilton’s Enough, to help us talk honestly and supportively about these questions.
- † Some of us have had to simplify our lives, like the people in the two new ABC Wednesday night comedies, against our wills. We are struggling to make ends meet, and sometimes the results are humorous—most of the time they are not.
- † Others of us, heeding the cautionary tales of this economic downturn, have decided to start saving more and buying less by choice. The trouble is that our economy has run on a rampant consumerism, which

is why recovery is slow. But as we learned last week from David Brooks, economists are urging a return to a producer rather than a consumer society.

- † We aren't sure what that kind of economy would look like, but it might mean refitting buildings and businesses to be more energy efficient; it might mean upgrading our infrastructure, which has been so long neglected; it might mean growing more sustainable communities that offer closer connection to God, the earth, and each other—as we have in our fledgling community garden.
- † Today we will take some steps, literally, toward realizing our true purpose in life—both as individuals and as a church. Thanks to Joanna's inspired writings each day and her persistence in organizing us, we will walk in CROP walk to be in solidarity with the poor.
- † We won't be running out and selling all our possessions, but we will take some small but important steps to realize the kingdom of God that Jesus speaks about in today's scripture. We will sing the songs of Africa, walk to the beat of Latin rhythms, savor the beauty of the earth with an Asian eye as we do.
- † For when we live out our true calling, we become producers for the kingdom even while we enjoy more than enough for ourselves. There is joy in simplicity, generosity, giving, and serving. Joy far greater than we get from more stuff.
- † Did you hear the one about the camel who went through the eye of the needle? It's enough to make you laugh out loud with possibility!
- † May it be so. Amen.
- † Close with sharing from Bob Phelps...

Source:

Adam Hamilton, Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity. 2008