

“My philosophy is do no harm to others. That’s really what religion is all about, right? ... I’m not really a church goer. I figure if you do unto others as you would have them do unto you, then you are doing all that God asks of you. ... Really, all you need to do is be nice to other people. That’s the ticket to heaven... Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Then, what are you worried about? If you have, you are saved.”

Each one of those statements was made to me or someone near me this past week. There seems to be a preponderance of this kind of thing going on now. For example, people who have no background in psychology, are now taking up residence on television stations, telling people over the air how to solve their emotional problems. People with no education in medicine think nothing of telling Dr. Lindholm that they are sure their gall bladder needs to be removed, without ever being diagnosed. All of you teachers are regularly assaulted by parents and others who are convinced that they know more about biology, handling children, or running a classroom than you do, though they have never taken a single credit in the field of education. Larry Allen regularly has someone bring in their vehicle and tell him what is wrong with it, even though they have trouble figuring out how to open the hood. And nearly every day, someone tells me that they have the key to spiritual life and know all of the answers that religion attempts to answer.

I don’t know about the rest of you, but what I have discovered is that when

someone with no background in a subject purports to be an expert in it, their answers may not be overtly wrong, but they are so simplistic that they border on naivete.

Oversimplification in religion is just as, or perhaps more dangerous, than oversimplification in medicine or social science. They often lead to disastrous results.

That is why I continue to be baffled by those who would not think of taking a class before checking the credentials of the teacher, or would not dream of going to a doctor without knowing where they received their degree, but will go to a church leader with no pastoral or social training at all for marriage counseling, or walk into a church and base their spiritual life on the ramblings of some hack who has no more education in theology than they do.

Some may suggest that this opinion makes me some kind of elitist. And there may be some truth to that. But basing your theology and your soul on the oversimplified aphorisms of an untrained Pastor is like taking medication prescribed to you by a 9<sup>th</sup> grader who happened to get a really good grade on his last Chemistry test.

Those of you who have been taking our class on Revelation know this first hand. It is dangerous when someone who has no experience in biblical or literary criticism attempts to interpret a 2000 year old text written in a genre they have never experienced in a culture they know little about. They come up with some of the most loony and bizarre stuff imaginable. Those interpretations would be quite entertaining and laughable, if it wasn't for the fact that other people actually listen to them as if they know what they are talking about. And when they do, we end up with the most grievous situations possible, from David Koreshes to world wars to human caused apocalyptic

disasters.

It is not that I do not understand the temptation. We live in an extremely complex world where simple answers are few and far between. I certainly understand the desire to make religion and faith more simple than daily life. But our spiritual life is just like Stan Burman said to me this past week about everything else. The more we learn, the more we realize how much we have to learn. Am I saying that to be connected to God, we need to all be theologians? Of course not. God will meet all of us exactly where we are. But what we do need to do is stop reducing our faith to simplistic platitudes. All of those people who told me that religion is all about being nice to people, or about accepting Jesus as your personal savior, or about living the golden rule, are all correct. But these are such gross oversimplifications of the Gospel that they become dangerous. The truth is, the Gospel is much more complex than that, and it demands that we hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it, if we are ever going to truly live it. And when we do those things, one of the first things we learn is that God demands a whole heck of a lot more of us than being nice to one another.

If we had any doubt of this, it would disappear with today's Gospel. What Jesus asks of us today is so far beyond the golden rule that people have been trying to discount it for centuries. In fact, eight out of ten sermons I have heard and read on this text have, in one way or another, suggested that Jesus didn't really literally mean what he said. "Jesus wasn't actually suggesting that we sell all of our stuff and become destitute. He didn't actually mean that it was harder for a rich person to enter God's kingdom than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. He didn't really mean

that God will reward people for leaving their families for the sake of the Good News. He did not literally mean that the last will be first and the first will be last.” Then the preacher goes into some long winded gyration of exegetical hocus-pocus to prove to us that this is really all hyperbole of some sort or another.

There are hundreds of ways that preachers attempt to relax us after we hear this shocking, demanding text. One of my favorites is the thing about the “eye of the needle.” Scholars have long puzzled about the weird metaphor of a camel going through a needle. Here are two explanations. One story goes that there is a desert pass outside Jerusalem, not unlike Antelope Canyon down here. The narrow part of that pass, it is said, used to be called “the eye of the needle”. Thus, it would be possible for a camel to get through this eye of the needle, just not easily. The second story is that “the eye of the needle” refers to a particular gate in ancient Jerusalem, which was so narrow that the only way a camel could get through it, was for someone to take off its packs. In either case, the preacher then suggests that what Jesus is saying is that rich people *can* get into God’s kingdom, just as long as they don’t become too attached to their own possessions. Just yesterday, I heard three or four people during our Diocesan Council meditation, express this idea. Since this is also the time of year when our churches are supposed to be talking about fund drives and supporting the church, you will also often hear a preacher deftly suggest that if you just dig a little deeper this year and up your pledge, this will prove that you too are not too encumbered by your possessions and all shall be well.

It’s quite good, don’t you think, and a great way to make the aphorism make

more sense, and by the way, try to raise more money simultaneously. The only problem is that there is not a shred of real archaeological evidence to support either of the stories. You can go on Jerusalem tours now and see the narrows or the gate and have a guide tell you that this is the famous “eye of the needle.” But alas, all those stories occurred as a result of this Gospel and not previous to it. Of course, a careful hearing of this Gospel tells us as much. If Jesus had really been talking about such a gate, why would the disciples incredulously say, “Then who can be saved?” Instead, they might have remarked, “too bad we have to carry our own stuff into the kingdom of God.” The disciples are genuinely dismayed today because what Jesus is saying is shocking and also quite scary.

I suspect that what is really going on in that odd camel aphorism has nothing to do with a gate or a narrows. Maybe what we have is a scribal error. Let us remember that we have no original manuscripts of any of the books of the Bible. What we do have are documents that were painstakingly copied by a monk somewhere in the basement of a monastery. In his book *Misquoting Jesus*, Bart Ehrmann points out that scholars have already discovered hundreds of transcription errors by these poor monks who spent their lives copying by hand. Without the monks, we would have no Bible today. But they were not Xerox machines. It is unrealistic to believe that they did not routinely make errors. Though Ehrmann never brings up today’s text, I wonder if this very bizarre saying is another example of such an error. I wonder, because of this; here is the word camel in first century Greek. *Kamilos*. And here is another word in that same Greek. *Kamelos*. I have talked about this before. Does anyone remember

what *kamelos* means in English? A hawser. Would one of you Lake Powell people describe to us landlubbers a hawser? That's right. It's that giant rope or cable used to moor a boat. Now tell me, which word do you think Jesus was more likely to use as a metaphor with a bunch of fisherman? And what do you think a desert monk who did not have a Lake Powell near them might think the word must be? Suddenly, the saying makes a heck of a lot more sense.

But whether it is a hawser or a camel, the point that Jesus is making can not be diluted. Entering the kingdom of God is not a walk in the park. Suggesting that the Gospel tells us that all we need to do is be nice to people is to totally contradict Jesus. It is little different than the wackos who tell us that the world is ending next week because it says so in Revelation. Both come when we try to reduce the powerful and frightening message of Jesus to a kindergarten Sunday School lesson.

Instead, we need to realize that Jesus calls us to a much deeper commitment to faith. Does that commitment include selling all we have and giving it to the food pantry and the church? It might, after all that is what Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa and many lesser known people have done in their attempt to bring about God's reign. They literally gave up all they had to be with and care for the poor. But I believe the real question for all of us today is this; What action do we need to take to change the status quo? What would we need to do right here in Page to change the social system that creates poverty, hopelessness and despair? Discovering this answer will mean avoiding the easy way out, the simplistic versions of spirituality. Instead, it means making an intellectual commitment to our faith. No more of these cop out be nice to

people responses. An intellectual commitment means discerning how God is calling us to bring about justice and dignity to all in our world. In Jesus's time, wealth was seen as a limited good, meaning that for one person to have it, someone else did not. The only way to redistribute wealth in such a culture was for rich people to give it back. In our capitalistic society, we have carried this understanding to the opposite extreme, suggesting that we can all accumulate as much wealth as possible and that this has NO effect on other people. Somewhere in between those extremes, the truth lies. Our job, Jesus tells us, is to discover how to best redistribute wealth in our own culture, and then take the very difficult steps necessary to make that happen.

Being nice to people is certainly a beginning and the golden rule is something Jesus invoked just like every leader of every major religious tradition. But today, Jesus tells us that it is going to take much more from us if we are going to bring about the world that he envisions, that elusive kingdom of God. The point is that we too will need to make similar sacrifices and complete commitment if we really expect to change the world.

The undiluted words of Jesus today say much to us not just as individuals but also as the church. We are not just called to make people feel better for a day or to give them a little something to eat. We are called to transform society so completely that the poor no longer exist. We are called to bring real and tangible hope to the thousands and thousands of people in our chaotic world dealing with desperate depression and hopeless conditions. We are called to bring abundance to those who have nothing. That's what bringing about the kingdom of God means.

We have begun that process here at St. David's. As a church, we've been relatively successful in living the golden rule. But the time has come now for us to hear and accept the challenges of today's Gospel.

How, specifically, do we do it? Those answers will come with deep intellectual discernment on our part. By avoiding simplistic answers and accepting Jesus's call today to fully commit our lives to bringing about justice to all of God's world, Jesus shows us that we can bring about the kingdom. Finally, is it worth it? Is it worth making the gigantic sacrifices Jesus asks of each of us today? One look in the eyes of those whose lives have completely changed through our past efforts and God's actions, is enough to convince me that it is worth everything.

Still, what is being asked of us today is beyond extreme. How *can* we do it? The answer to that question is also in today's Gospel, though I will tell you I missed it for many years. As Jesus is about to break the bad news to the rich man, we hear this; "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Though he knows this man may never be able to do the very difficult thing Jesus suggests, he continues to love him.

We too, may not be able to do all God asks of us. But we can try. We can try because we know that no matter what, God loves us. And it is in the midst of that trying, that everything starts changing and we bring dignity and full life to others. We have been privileged here at St. David's to see tiny glimpses of God's kingdom in our midst. It is now time to turn those glimpses into seconds and those seconds into minutes and those minutes into a transformed world. We can do it, because with God, all things are possible. Amen.