

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Then Job replied: "I am still bitter in my complaint – God's hand is heavy despite my groaning. If only I knew where to find the Almighty, so I could approach the Judgment Seat! I would make my case to God, and expound my best arguments in my defense. But I would also benefit from hearing the answers, and understand what is behind all this. Would God contend with me in the greatness of Divine power? No, God would give me the chance to make my case! There an upright person could make such a convincing case, that I should be acquitted forever by my judge. But if I go east, God is not there; if I go west, I find nothing. When God is in the north, I can see no one; when God turns south, I don't even catch a glimpse. The Most High makes my heart sink, and makes my body shake in terror. Even so, I'm not silenced by the darkness, nor by the deep gloom that covers my face."

Hebrews 4:12-16

Indeed, God's word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It pierces so deeply that it divides even soul and spirit, bone and marrow, and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Nothing is concealed from God; all lies bare and exposed before the eyes of the One to whom we must render an account. Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Firstborn of God; let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and favor, and find help in time of need.

Mark 10:17-31

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, someone ran up and knelt before him, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not kill; Do not commit adultery; Do not steal; Do not bear false witness; Do not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" And the questioner said to Jesus "Teacher, all these things I have observed since my youth." And Jesus looked upon the questioner with love and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Dismayed by this word, the person went away sorrowful, because of having great possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to the disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the realm of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the realm 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 realm of God." And they were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Peter began to say to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer.

I have good news! Our attempts at “Saving Jesus” are having an effect. I’m referring, of course, to the series called *Saving Jesus* (and others), which encourage us to reclaim Christianity from being perceived as the sole property of our more conservative sisters and brothers. Last week, the Conservative Bible Project announced that it was time to rewrite the Bible - because the *literal* Word of God had somehow been corrupted into the *liberal* Word of God. In taking the Bible back to its right-wing roots, the project would do such things as:

- provide a strong framework without corruption by liberal bias
- avoid "gender inclusive" language, and other modern emasculation of Christianity
- use powerful new conservative terms as they develop
- not deny or downplay the very real existence of Hell or the Devil.
- explain the numerous economic parables with their full free-market economy meaning

This is not the first time a scissors has been taken to the Bible. Marcion in the 2nd century, Thomas Jefferson in the early 19th (1820). But over the past years, progressive Christians have been lamenting that our identity as Christians has been hijacked. Many don’t even want to be identified as Christian anymore, for fear of being automatically aligned with a version of it to which they do not subscribe. And for our part, we’ve doing a lot of hand wringing and bemoaning our inability to counteract the predominant picture. Hence, programs like *Saving Jesus* – which appear to be having an impact.

And then there’s Michael Moore. I saw his new film *Capitalism: A Love Story*, and what impressed/surprised me the most is that Moore talks about religion – in a positive way! About his Catholic upbringing: “I thought it was important to this discussion. I’m not a proselytizer, but I do have very strong beliefs and these beliefs were formed not in the school of Karl Marx, but in the Catholic Church. Priests and nuns taught me these lessons of how we're to treat each other, how we're to treat the poor, and how we're to divide up the pie.” And he has interviews with several priests and even a couple of bishops who speak passionately about the need to, not only have charity for the poor, but to change the systems that keep people in poverty.

It was astounding at how well Christianity came off in the movie. Jesus appears to be making a come-back. Jesus was even quoted, right out of today’s gospel text: “Go, sell what you own, give to the poor, then come, follow me.” It will be interesting to see what the Conservative Bible Project does with that – and all the other places where Jesus and the prophets before him are crystal clear about our obligation to the poor. This isn’t about a liberal or conservative view of the Bible; it’s simply what it says.

To be fair, most of us have difficulty with this passage. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the realm of God.” “Go, sell what you own, give to the poor.” It’s a heavy demand. And even when we protest that we’re not rich, we know that we are citizens of a country that enjoys the lion’s share of the world’s wealth. So we struggle in the tension of what Jesus requires of us.

In order to deal with this tension, many interpreters of the story try to soften its economic demands by making it a matter of personal spirituality:

- An ancient scribe added: "how hard it is for those *who trust in riches* to enter the realm of God"
- Another created the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle." Camels could pass only if stooped and unladen, implying that Jesus was talking about wealthy people's attitudes.
- Others say that Jesus perceived that wealth was this particular person's weak spot, not necessarily ours - Princess Diana: “They say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable, but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?”

The economic demand of the text does make us squirm - which explains the attempts to spiritualize it and take away some of its bite. Although there's nothing wrong with looking at it in that way too. The questioner in the story was a spiritual seeker, a religious person who knew the commandments and kept them, and who now came to Jesus, asking about what we might call "the more." She senses that there's more of the Sacred to be experienced and wants to know what to do in order to find it. And discovers that it's not about doing something, but of surrendering one's whole self. Jesus doesn't demand poverty for poverty's sake, but like a laser, pinpoints what keeps her from the "more" she wants from God. And in some ways, that's even more challenging than taking this only as literal wealth. Because then we have to ask ourselves: what keeps us from the "more" – what are the barriers that prevent us from being fully receptive to the Divine Presence in our lives? If it's not literal riches, then what is it?

This is something that all the world's religions address – our need to detach in order to have a truly fulfilled life. The Buddha, for example, taught that attachment to desire for things, people, concepts, ideas and opinions about ourselves and the world around us - is the deepest cause of our suffering. Not the things, people, or ideas in and of themselves, but the attachment to our desire for them. So it doesn't mean that there is anything wrong with striving to accomplish something, owning things, or loving your friends and family. Jesus and the Buddha would agree on this point. Jesus' primary call is a call to a life of discipleship, not a life of poverty; a call to a new community, not extreme asceticism. And in that sense, we, like the spiritual seeker in the story, must be aware of those things, people, concepts, ideas and opinions to which we are attached – and unlike the seeker of the story, be willing to enter into a discipline of detachment in order to be faithful disciples.

So that's one aspect of the story; it's not just about wealth. But we also need to take seriously the other aspect that is about wealth. Jesus does not tell the seeker merely to detach from desire for her possessions, but goes a step further by saying, "Give it all to the poor." This is more than personal spiritual detachment; this is a call for a change in relationship to the poor—to connect with them, help them, identify with them. It's really a call to give up power. Money talks, right? Wealth is an effective sign of power; what matters about wealth is what it allows its owner to do, the means it provides to exert one's will in worldly affairs. The great danger of wealth, as Jesus explains it to the disciples, is not that wealth is somehow inherently evil; the problem with wealth is that it is a constant temptation to put the working of one's own will in place of responsiveness to God's will.

This may have caused the seeker's grief and apparent inability to do what Jesus asks. It would mean surrendering not only wealth, but also status and power. It would mean, not just handing over charity, but also participating in economic justice. Evidently the financial, social, and political costs were too great. Notice in v.30 that persecutions will accompany a life of authentic discipleship, because it goes against the world's values and will arouse the world's ire.

The final song in *Capitalism* was "Jesus Christ" by Woody Guthrie.

Jesus Christ was a man who traveled through the land

A hard-working man and brave

He said to the rich, "Give your money to the poor,"

But they laid Jesus Christ in His grave

We have good reason to squirm. And so we wrestle with the tension of being both wealthy and not wealthy, of being willing to give up our whole selves in order to find our true selves, of following the call to discipleship while living in a world which values wealth and power. These are paradoxes that cannot – or should not - be easily resolved. Which is probably the point of the story – why Jesus looks upon the seeker with love, looks upon us with love. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews said it well: "God's word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword. It pierces so deeply that it divides even soul and spirit, bone and marrow, and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' The disciples could have been responding to that when they cried, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus responds: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible," and is speaking to us as well as them.

I'll be interested in seeing how the Conservative Bible Project gives a "full free-market economy meaning" to this text. But it really doesn't matter. As long as we tell our story of Jesus. Like Michael Moore did. It doesn't matter if you like him and his movies or not. But you have to admire the fact that he tells his faith story. In fact, wouldn't it make a great "postcard" for our website? That's exactly the kind of story we each need to be able to tell. This is how to reclaim Jesus: *to do* the work of compassion and care and justice for all "the least of these." But also *to tell* the story: "This is why I am a follower of Jesus." "This is why I am a member of this congregation." It wouldn't even take much editing: "I have very strong beliefs and these beliefs were formed in the Church, where I learned the lessons of how we're to treat each other, how we're to treat the poor, and how we're to divide up the pie." Who knew I'd get a sermon illustration out of Michael Moore? But there it is. With God, all things are possible.

Amen