



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
14 October 2018  
Sermon: Threads, Needles, and Camels  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15  
Mark 10:17-31

At 1<sup>st</sup> City Church, upon hearing the pastor's sermon on Mark 10, where Jesus commands the wealthy man to "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me," Mr. Rigby walked out of the sanctuary and left his Subaru Outback in the church parking lot, giving the keys to a nearby waiter at the restaurant where he normally has Sunday lunch before heading straight into the office of the only realtor within walking distance, where he put his family home, passed down from his parents, on the market. It would take 4 months to sell, but he thought that too was a proper form of penance for having owned it in the first place. He then spent the remaining days of his life volunteering at various non-profits around town, refusing to take any income, eating what food was left over at the end of the day. His family, of course, grew quite dismayed. Mrs. Rigby took on a second job to make up for the lost income, and also to rent a new apartment near her work, since, you know, the car and the house were gone. Rigby Jr. had to drop out of college to support his

siblings still in high school. The members of 1<sup>st</sup> City Church soon became quite concerned with Mr. Rigby sleeping on the fellowship hall floor every night.

Though they appreciated all the new help that he offered now around the church, not to mention that year's pledge card of 100% of his assets, they were also concerned for Mr. Rigby's well-being. I mean, how on earth was he ever going to retire? Was he going to live in the church the rest of his life? In desperation, Mr. Rigby's friends turned their anger toward the pastor at 1<sup>st</sup> City Church who had preached that sermon. "Was that really practical?" they asked? Was it responsible to preach such extreme renunciation, when we all still have to live in this world? "It was the word of God," the pastor protested, as they showed the Right Reverend the door.

Down the street, at 2<sup>nd</sup> City Church, known as the more theologically progressive congregation in town, another pastor took a metaphorical approach to the text. You see, said the pastor, it can't be so much about giving away all your possessions. That may have worked in Mark's time, when Jesus was expected to return very very soon, any day in fact, but in America today, you can't just give up all that you have. In fact, giving it all away not only puts you at extreme risk, but it also puts unnecessary pressure on what little is left of America's safety net, taking away scarce resources from those who really need it. But there is still a kernel to be gained here, said the pastor. It is about renunciation, but in a wider sense than just

money. It's about disencumbering ourselves of anything that gets in the way of our faith, of our participation in our community. It's about the bad habits, the shame, the secrets, the fear, the anger that you and I hold on to. Here at 2<sup>nd</sup> City Church, said the pastor, we are called to bring our whole selves, not just the happy-go-lucky façade that we put on for the office or in Christmas cards. We can bring those things that hold us back, whatever it is, to this body of Christ, because God can even use that shame or that fear to build community in ways we never imagined.

It was a beautiful sermon, believe me, even though, about halfway through it, three congregants left, believing that the pastor had watered down Jesus's radical support of the Democratic party. The message really spoke to one young member in her 30s, who had been carrying a hard secret in the second half of her life, a secret from her teenage years about an event that had, over the course of her life, brought on all the signs of Post-Traumatic Stress: deep bouts of depression, nightmares and flashbacks, along with years of distorted self-perception. That event was an assault by a boy when they were both teenagers. And, knowing that her assailant now held a powerful position in that city, where he could use his power perhaps to hurt others, after hearing the pastor's sermon, she decided to speak up. She got up the courage one Sunday evening a few weeks later at the church coffee hour to say, "When we were both teenagers one of the members of

our city council assaulted me, and it's a secret that I have been carrying; it is a wound that I have slowly been healing from, but I've kept it from you, from this congregation, from this city. I am ready now to disencumber myself from it," she said, "because my pastor said that we can be our full selves here in this community, that we can be authentic, that we can tell the truth here, because this is what Jesus wanted for that rich young ruler."

But let's just stop right there, because we don't need to hide behind a hypothetical here. This isn't a thought experiment anymore. Before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, we saw on a national stage a few weeks ago what can happen in such a case, when someone's honesty, when her experiences, when her authenticity gets in the way of politics and power.

A few weeks ago, when I was looking ahead at the lectionary, when I saw this difficult passage about the camel and the needle, I envisioned myself preaching a sermon similar to the one I imagined for 2<sup>nd</sup> City church. I was going to say something along these lines: that the things that cut us off from one another, like money for this rich man, that we are called, in many and various ways to let go of such things, whether that means giving away some of the wealth you obsess over, or letting people know about the anxieties that you bring into new relationships, or sharing your struggles when we talk about our congregation's entrenchment in white supremacy. I wanted to say, whatever it is, you can bring it

here, you are called to bring it here, because God joins us together, because God uses our whole selves, even the parts of ourselves that we have trouble acknowledging, as the Spirit weaves together a vibrant and healing tapestry of community here at Grace Covenant.

It took me a while to realize that I can't preach that anymore without some reservation. I was half-way through my preparations for that sermon when I realized I had to start over. Maybe I've been too sheltered or naïve, because of circumstance, because my race, and gender, and class and sexuality have protected me. But over the past few weeks, I learned again, I've learned more deeply just how much people take advantage, just how much people and systems and politics do not care for others.

A rich man comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life and Jesus answers him, "You know what you've got to do, follow the commandments." But the man persists, "Great. Fine. Done. But Jesus why do I still feel like I'm lacking? Why do I feel cut off from eternal life?" And Jesus loves this man. He looks at him with compassion, so he goes a step further. "The reason why you feel cut off is because of your obsession with things instead of God. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." And the man hangs his head low, as he leaves with his riches.

You know, there's this perfectly reasonable response to Jesus's demand here. That response hears Jesus's call to unburden ourselves and follow him, but it reminds us that there is a reason we hold onto the things that protect us. The reason is that we live in a world where people take advantage of vulnerability; where people who lead precarious, unsheltered lives are sometimes railroaded by those with property and power.

This past week members of our pastoral staff and many other community clergy met with the director of the Steady Collective, a safe needle exchange program that operates in West Asheville among other places.<sup>1</sup> We learned that in the first 10 months alone in this year, 50 lives have been saved by Narcan, the anti-overdose drug that Steady Collective distributes. Those are 50 people that are here today, who otherwise would be dead, because of what Steady does. And there is currently a city injunction against Steady Collective in West Asheville, because of a range of issues, and one of those issues is that our zoning laws have been constructed and used to keep poor and addicted people in Asheville invisible and vulnerable, even in the communities where they live. So in the name of zoning, instead of partnering with Steady to focus on the conditions that make for poverty and addiction, a process is well underway to take away one of the few resources in our city that is keeping people alive on a daily basis.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.firestorm.coop/news/126-needles-on-haywood-road.html>

Sometimes, we shrink at Jesus's radical demand, because, in countless different ways, the world tells us to protect ourselves first, to hold onto what is yours, keep those cards close to your chest. Sometimes, it looks like our systems are designed so that everyone has to be first and only for themselves. Professor Christine Blasey Ford said to the Senate Judiciary Committee: "Once he was selected and it seemed like he was popular and it was a sure vote, I was calculating daily the risk/benefit for me of coming forward, and wondering whether I would just be jumping in front of a train that was headed to where it was headed anyway and that I would just be personally annihilated."

You know, for the longest time, I thought caring for someone was always about authenticity. When I worked as a hospital chaplain, I was taught a therapeutic technique of how to show acceptance to others without judgment.<sup>2</sup> My supervisors told me that if you can sit with a hospital patient long enough, and bear with their struggles, their shame, their secrets, and nonetheless love them and accept them for who they are, for who they really are, not who you, or the doctors, or their family, or even the patient thinks they should be, but instead you accept them for who they are right now, in that moment, then you will be showing them a small glimpse of God's unconditional grace for us all. You can see why this type of acceptance can be healing in the hospital, when you're a patient and a medical

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<sup>2</sup> I write about this extensively in my book, *The Chaplain's Presence and Medical Power: Rethinking Loss in the Hospital System* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

team might be focusing squarely on the illness, and you're poked and prodded and tested every which way. You might be feeling less than human, so if a chaplain comes and just listens and shows love, that could be a breath of fresh air. I still think that authenticity is healing. I believe that vulnerability and love are needed in a world that seems always on its guard.

But, this feeling that we must protect ourselves, that we must hold back, or hold onto the things we hide, that we must shrink from Jesus' radical demand and claim on our lives. These reactions are revealing: they tell us there is something wrong with this world, with the communities we live in, with this town, with this state, with this country, because these communities are unsafe for so many people. And that means, as the body of Christ, our care must get bigger. As Jesus followers, yes, we are called to bring our full and complicated and messy selves to this community, but we are also called make this community and all of our communities into places that reflect God's grace and God's justice. It takes work to be a church and a city and a country where people really can lay down their burdens and be who God calls them to be, and not be victimized, not be run over by systems or powerful people who use others for their own gain. It takes work to be a people who actually trust that God really is in this place, to really trust that everyone is a child of God, and not treat others as obstacles or tools for our own agendas.

In fact, this is our undertaking this stewardship season.<sup>3</sup> We are not talking about pledges and giving, in every sense of that term, so that the church can survive for its own sake, but rather so that our stewardship of this community and the communities that surround this place can support ministries of growth, and partnership, and truth telling. We give as a way to be the people that we claim to be or hope in faith that we are becoming. We give because we believe that none of us are alone, that we are called together to become a community that works for change in this world, this world that is so much in need of better care, better stewardship, safer and more reliable spaces, and systems, and institutions. We give because we believe that each of our lives is a thread, intricately woven and connected in a wider web of life, and we are called to care for this web of life, and our giving is a part of that care. You know, we give because we are sick and tired of how mean and unsafe and power-for-the-sake-of-power hungry our communities and our institutions have revealed themselves to be over the years.

And, in the name of truth telling, as we give, in every sense of that word, we must also say that maybe that's not enough, that our work may not change this world, may not make it what it should be, what it should have been these last few weeks, or in all the weeks to come. We are, after all, followers of a savior, not saviors ourselves.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://gcpcusa.org/ways-to-give/giving/stewardship/>

But our Gospel story continues. Peter, sensing that he needed more from Jesus, speaking for the disciples, after Jesus's words about the camel going through the eye of the needle, cried out, "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." But Peter wasn't sure what Jesus meant, so he pressed him further, and Jesus answered, saying "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Jesus doesn't stop with the rich ruler; he proclaims God's grace. He promises God's justice. Our diligence and our care, our giving and our authenticity, our laying down our burdens in the body of Christ, all of it, we do not do it alone, because alone we are not enough, it will never be enough. But the promise is that, in partnership with the Spirit, we shine a light on the one who makes all things new, who binds together our community, who binds me to you. As the body of Christ, we point to, and we hope for the one who is already at work in this wounded world.

Trust also that God is at work in you and in us as well, making us people who can speak truth and care radically in places that can seem callous and indifferent right now. Thanks be to God.