

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Who then can be saved?’”

This is the really tough one,
the one we don’t want to hear.

The problem is,
that we all want to be rich
and get into heaven.

This is the place in the bible where we find out
that you just can’t do that.

And no matter how many times we hear it, we don’t really believe it.
Or at least we seldom act like we do.

We deny the clear facts presented to us,
and go on trying to stuff that camel through the eye of the needle.

We forget that many of us in the first world
will be the last in the world to come.

We think that since God has blessed us so far,
the blessings will continue.

In Old Testament times,
and to be fair we haven’t changed all that much in a few thousand years,
riches and children were considered clear evidence of God’s blessing.

Great wealth brought with it great responsibilities, of course.

The first fruits went to God,
and the gleanings went to the poor,
but you got to keep the rest.

If you could get rich on what was left,
it was considered a sign of God’s favor.

The rich young lord

who comes up to Jesus in our Gospel this morning seeking guidance,
was actually doing everything right,
following all the rules.

God's favor was shining on him,
And everybody knew it.

He is coming to Jesus just to be sure
that there isn't some secret rule that he's not aware of.

Boy did he get a surprise!

Whenever we hear this passage
we run the risk of falling into the trap of thinking it's about the money,
but it really isn't.

Well, it is a little bit about money,
in a tangential sort of way,
but in actuality it's really more directly about
salvation.

And following the rules.

If I tell you the story in a slightly different way,
I think you'll get the point.

I know I've used this story before, so if you've heard it, bare with me.

A man dies and goes to heaven.

And Of course, St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates.

St. Peter says, "Here's how it works.

You need 100 points to get it into heaven.

You answer a few questions,
and I'll give you points for each answer,
depending on how good they are.

If you make it to 100 points, you get in."

First, tell me what good things you've done in your life.

"Okay," the man says. "I was married to the same woman for 50 years

and never cheated on her, not even in my imagination.”

“That’s wonderful,” says St. Peter, “that’s worth three points!”

“Three points?” he says.

“Well, I attended church all my life

and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.”

“Terrific!” says St. Peter. “That’s certainly worth a point.”

“One point?”

I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.”

“Fantastic, that’s good for two more points.”

“Two points!” the man cries.

“At this rate the only way I’ll ever get into heaven is by the grace of God.”

“Great answer, 100 points! Come on in!” –

You see?

The story of the rich young lord isn’t about money,

it’s really about getting comfortable with your status in the here after.

Or more correctly, the importance of not getting too comfortable.

The truth is, there is nothing you can do or say

that will assure your salvation.

We are saved by the grace of God alone.

That is why we prayed in our collect this morning,

“We pray (thee) that [thy/your] grace may always precede and follow us.”

We are always in need of a double measure of grace.

Always.

So, the real problem with money

is not that it makes us rich,

but that it deceives us into thinking we’re safe;

that we are in control.

In the last five or six years many of us have had to come to terms

with how much we rely on money for our sense of safety.

In the midst of, and fallout after, the pandemic,
the economy has struggled

And many have found it more difficult to be generous.

And money isn't the only thing that can threaten our salvation.

The truth of the matter is

that anything that deceives us into thinking we're safe
is a grave danger to our souls.

I believe that is the subtle, though great danger of fundamentalism,
with its black and white world
and pat answers.

Anything that appears to give us surety is a risk.

We must rely solely and utterly on the grace of God.

The problem that the rich young lord couldn't see,
wasn't that he hadn't done enough,

but that he actually thought it was possible to do enough.

To rely utterly on another for salvation can be a fearful place.

It takes courage to give up that control,
even though that control is a phantom.

But it is courage well rewarded.

Notice the response of Jesus to the rich young lord.

“Jesus looked at him and loved him.”

Often Jesus is described as looking with love on those he will heal.

Jesus rewards the courage of the rich young lord
with love.

His holy gaze looks inside the man,
sees the hole in his heart and fills it.

And then he tells him exactly what he needs to hear,
even though it wasn't the answer he was looking for.

Though I do not presume to know for sure,

in the response of the rich young lord to Jesus' request,

I believe I can see a flicker of the light of his salvation.

We don't ever hear of him again,

and so we don't really know whether he sold off all he owned
and gave the money to the poor or not.

Since he never reappears,

that we know of,

it is assumed by many that he does not join Jesus' band.

So why do I think his encounter with Jesus has saved him?

Look at his response.

"He was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

The question that comes to my mind is, "For what was he grieving?"

Was he grieving for his possessions?

Was he grieving for himself?

I don't think it really matters in the end.

Either way it's good news!

If he is grieving for his possessions

might it not be because they will be leaving him,
or because they no longer hold any allure for him?

They have become empty and have no more power over him.

If this is the case

then he truly has passed the camel through the eye of the needle
and disengaged himself from his wealth.

And what if he is grieving for himself;

grieving because he sees that he cannot separate himself from his wealth,
is indeed prisoner to it,
powerless in its grip.

Will he not see that he is then utterly beholden to God's grace for his redemption?

Is that not where we all find ourselves in the end,

regardless of our financial position?

Is he then indeed no worse off than the rest of us,
and perhaps better off,

because he has come to see the truth of his situation with clarity?

That is, I believe, the truly good news of this story.

Jesus gave us the clue at the very beginning,

“God is good.”

When we come to Christ in faith and ask for what we need,
we receive in abundance just what we need.

Even though we may ask the wrong questions,
we get the right answers.

Christ gazes on us with those eyes that see into our hearts,
loves us, and fills us up.

Do I know that I am saved?

No. But I have faith.

For I know that I can be.

And I know that God loves me.

And so I struggle.

Struggle to love God with all my heart
and with all my mind
and with all my strength.

Struggle to love my neighbor as myself.

And I hope...Hope in Faith.

And I bid you hope in faith as well.

For God is good, And God does love us,
each one of us.

O Lord, so teach us to number our days
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Amen.