

So the last will be first and the first will be last. I think Vikings' fans have a handle on this... We can have great teams and win division titles, but when it comes to the big one... it always gets away... the last will be first, and the first will be last...

We have a lot of material in our gospel reading. And most of it is very difficult for us to hear... We have the rich man asking Jesus what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. We have Jesus saying that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. And we also hear many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

Difficult reading, and well, first things first, look at verse 21, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..." Before we go any further, let's hang on to that... Jesus loved him... That is the most important thing to remember... Despite any and all shortcomings of this man, Jesus loved him...

What I'd like to do this morning is spend some time reflecting on money and especially in connection with eternal life and the kingdom of God. I'm not so sure this is as much about money as it's about living a life of meaning and purpose and connectedness.

Now, I'll be honest, every time Jesus starts talking about money I start squirming... when I read this gospel lesson, I feel condemned... I'm not the richest person in the world, but I'm not the poorest either. This reading makes me uncomfortable... I'd love to be able to explain it all away and say it doesn't apply to us, but the truth is, it does...

It's hard to escape, all of us, by virtue of the fact that we live in this country, we can all identify with being that rich guy! And of course, Jesus goes on to say that it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples hear all of this and they ask the big question, the question we all have, okay, well then, if that's true, "Who can be saved?" It looks impossible...

Jesus responds, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible..."

Couple stories... I've worked with older adults in different agencies and churches for the last twenty-five years or so. As I've gotten older I've started to see things a little differently. And there are a lot of different chapters in our lives.

There was a chapter when Kris and I got married and we were poor. I remember having ten dollars to last a whole week... We walked up and down the grocery aisles, carefully deciding what to buy. We bought chicken backs, potatoes, and lots of mac and cheese... We both worked two jobs and went to school, hope seemed pretty distant.

As we finished school, we got better jobs, and a little more money, we bought a tiny one-bedroom house in south Minneapolis. Johanna was born and suddenly we were paying for day care, a mortgage, a car, insurance...all those typical costs of living. And money is decisions, we found a way to manage... Life was certainly a little more hopeful than when we were first married.

Then there was another chapter when we raised kids—a little bigger house, it was all about spending money on school and activities and then paying for college... Again, money is choices... And of course, we were so lucky and thankful that we didn't have a major health issue or a bad accident.

And then the kids got married, and suddenly we realized we're not going to work for forever and it was time to start saving for retirement. Yet another chapter in our life, this time to get ready for the next chapter—retirement!

I imagine our story is not too different than many of yours. Many different chapters, different financial demands, different financial situations, always making decisions.

Money is always about choices, and for most of us, the choices we make are not so much about living recklessly, but rather responsibly. Taking care of our obligations and families. It's our context.

Some may spend more or less on all these different chapters in life, some people make more than others, some are richer some are poorer, but in the end, generally speaking we all seem to make reasonable and responsible decisions.

Over many years of older adult ministry, I've been so fortunate to get to know many, many wonderful saints in retirement and beyond. As we age and start wondering about the horizon of our life, I've seen so many people start giving things away. It often starts with family mementos, passing things from one generation to the next.

And so often, as we age I see people becoming more and more generous. Money doesn't seem to be as important as it used to be. Many people give more money to church and other community groups. We make financial gifts to our children. People often start downsizing, giving furniture to the grandkids, maybe the car. As we contemplate our horizon our relationship with money changes.

And because of our good health care, we're living much longer now than at any time in human history, and many people simply out-live their retirement savings. When I was in Austin, almost on a daily basis I would hear stories of aging and money and generosity...

Often, as we go through the final chapters in our life, we learn the reality of what Jesus is talking about. If we're lucky we will live a long life, and many people come to the place where they have literally given all their possessions away. I've given witness to this, many times...

I remember a good friend Maime, she passed away at 104. She spent her last fifteen years in assisted living and a nursing home. All her money was gone. I remember when we celebrated her one hundredth birthday and she was sharp as a tack. Her whole career was in nursing and she was one of the most compassionate people I've ever met.

When I would visit, she would ask all kinds of questions. How is your wife? How are your kids? Do you have any grandkids yet? She was so full of love and wisdom. And always good humor, telling jokes. I couldn't get away from her before she would insist on saying prayers for me. I always felt blessed to be present and to receive her care and attention.

Mamie was full of eternal life. Her life was a testament to a life well lived, a life full of meaning and purpose and value and love...

When Mamie passed away, a million people showed up for the funeral. Well, maybe a couple hundred. Many of the people were the staff at the nursing home. During the fellowship time, I heard stories after stories of how the staff would talk with Mamie and how she listened to them and loved them.

Mamie may have out lived all of her money, but she was the richest person I've ever met. So full of love and blessing and wisdom...

The words of Jesus echo in my mind, "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." That's pretty much what Mamie did. Money had no meaning for her, her treasure was in those she loved, and she longed for that day when she did finally take the hand of Jesus and followed him.

I know this gospel lesson is hard to hear, and yet I believe it because I've seen it. Jesus is a master teacher of wisdom; and he has a way of inviting us into that mystery.

As we grow older money just doesn't seem as important as it once was. As we contemplate that final horizon, we let go of possessions we often find compassion for each other. Those who are last come to love those who are first... and vice versa... And suddenly that hierarchy of the first and the last just isn't meaningful anymore...

All together we are a common union, a communion of believers. And after all, we are all in the Body of Christ.

God keeps working with us. Instead of emphasizing what separates us, God is continually finding ways to connect us, one to another. We are all very different, we are all different ages.

And yet, we are all very much one, and we celebrate our differences, and we celebrate our wholeness.

And it is indeed true, that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. And indeed, that this happens at all is pure miracle. And let's remember, with God, nothing is impossible. Amen...