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Our Gospel lesson today is about one of our favorite topics to talk about – money. It's easy to talk about because it's not very important to us, and we don't spend much time thinking about it, and we're so public about it. There's none of the energy around it that we have around secrets. I'm obviously being sarcastic here. Money is important to us, and it combines that importance with a kind of respectful secrecy so that money has lots of power in our lives but we can't talk about it, at least not talk about it and continue to be polite and respected.

But it is something that Jesus talks about a lot. Today we have one of his most memorable teachings on money – and really one of his most memorable teachings about anything – “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”¹

Let's be clear that Jesus isn't just talking about the Kingdom of God only in the sense of a future life. This Kingdom of God is about life now. It's both/and – it starts with the abundant life that the way of Jesus offers to us now. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” That is Jesus' promise in John's Gospel.² That is the kingdom.

You know this passage seems pretty counter-cultural, but it speaks to a truth that we already know. We're nearly constantly invited to see our worth, our value as a function of how much we have or how much we make. But we all know that this is a treadmill that only speeds up where our value and worth as people always eludes us.

We're invited on similar treadmills in lots of ways. It's money, when how much we have or make determines how we value ourselves. It's our appearance, when fearing that we don't meet some ideal keeps us shut off from others. It's fitness, when we can never run far enough or be fit enough to make us fully happy. It's education, if our degrees become about separateness and superiority instead of desire for new and deeper understanding. It's kids, when the outcomes in our kids' lives determines how much value we find for ourselves.

All of these things are good. But when they become ends in themselves they cut us off from others, from God. When these things become treadmills with a cycle that isolates us, that's when they promise joy that they can't ultimately deliver.

There's a pattern in our religion of giving up. Jesus tells us we have to leave our parents, sisters, brothers. He tells the disciples to leave nearly everything behind when they go to follow him. Jesus tells us that we have to lose our lives in order to find our lives. There's something about our journey that requires us to give up the things we think give meaning and purpose and joy and satisfaction, in order to find those things that really do. Giving things up forms a pattern of pivoting outward. We hear it again and again in the gospels - including in this today's text. Looking outward from ourselves is essential to our being the people God calls us to be.

¹ Mark 10: 25 (NRSV).

² John 10:10 (NRSV).

And here's the promise...when we go through the eye of the needle, when we give up those things we have to give up, then what we get, what we become, is nothing less than the Kingdom of God.

And I've been using the analogy of a treadmill, but it would be just as apt to say a wall, because what all of these things – money chiefly among them – what all of these things can do is separate us from each other. They let us build an illusion of control, of ultimate self-sufficiency. But the truth is that we always need each other, we need community.

There's a famous story of a woman who has lost her child and whose grief was inconsolable. She carries her child's body to physicians and healers and no one can bring her child back. She goes to see a wise sage outside of her town, and he tells her that he can help her but first she has to collect mustard seeds from a household that had not suffered loss. When the woman visited house after house, she discovered no house untouched by loss, untouched by difficulty. This support, this union, in suffering let the woman bury her child and begin to release her grief.³

The God who suffered with us, for us, on the cross, promises us that we're not alone in difficulty. And our connection to each other, that is the foundation of healing, it's the foundation of a joy that's durable, a joy that is deeper than our circumstances. It's the foundation of our connection to God.

All of these things we have – money, power, control – they can turn us in on ourselves or they can turn us outward towards others. Desmond Tutu writes that difficulty in life can embitter us or ennoble us.⁴ And our actions, the patterns of our lives have a lot to do with which of these define us. And a pattern of generosity, a pattern of looking outward to others, is among the keys to a life of meaning, a life of joy.

I like stewardship season at church. I realize that makes me somewhat of an outlier. I like it because it brings us back to the basic questions of why we value the church, why it's worth it to us to invest time and money here.

And it's important because it offers us life from a deeper place than the events we experience. And let me be clear, the promise here is not that the events of our lives will all be happy or easy, the promise is that we're not alone, no matter what happens, we have each other, and in that, we have God. That connection gives us joy from a deeper place.

And it's generosity that's the fastest way for us to experience joy for ourselves.⁵ It's in giving that we receive, we know from Jesus, and we know from our lives. It's in giving that we build something beyond ourselves.

From 2016 to 2017 – the most recent years for which data are available -- we were the fastest growing Episcopal parish in the entire church.⁶ It's a remarkable statistic and a remarkable community that we share here. If you're new, we are so glad that you're here.

³ See The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. *The Book of Joy*. Pages 112-3.

⁴ *The Book of Joy*. Page 159.

⁵ See *The Book of Joy*. Page 261.

⁶ According to parochial report data measuring growth in membership and financial contributions.

Together, we're creating an outward looking, generous community. The Hill is a symbol of just that. In 2019 we'll take full financial responsibility for The Hill. The grant that helped get the Hill started is ending, so now it's up to us to continue spreading the Good News of Christ in southeast Austin. We have an open, thoughtful approach to what it means to follow Jesus – and we have an obligation to spread that beyond just this campus. We've found folks at the Hill who are receptive, and who are building sustainable ministry. And we're forming relationships at The Hill that are meaningful, durable, and that are already changing the shape of our community in ways that align us more deeply with God's love. We need your support to keep fulfilling the call we share on Woodland Avenue.

On this campus, we're looking both ahead and outward. We're focused on continuing to build a sense of community as we grow, with a renewed emphasis on pastoral care, on high-quality programming – particularly small group programming – and on serving those in need outside of our parish.

We're helping to build a different future for families near The Hill by offering high-quality early childhood education that's affordable through Hillside Early Childhood Center. Several years ago we identified a shortage of high-quality early childhood education as a real need in Austin. We do education well – we think it is part of our call from God – and with your continued support we will keep growing Hillside to help our neighbors in southeast Austin.

Building lives that look outward to others, building a community that calls us to service, to love, that calls us to see our worth in something other than what we have and what we make; building a place where our lives are ennobled in the service of a higher call. That's what your generosity does, that's what the kingdom of God is.

It's part of the rhythm of gathering to worship each week, part of the rhythm of following the Way of Jesus. It's the imperative to form a parish community that shapes us according to our highest values, a community that calls us to act from our best selves- concern for one another and for those less fortunate, a thoughtful approach to questions of meaning and purpose, respect for everyone, a call to act not just from self-interest but to see that our interests are interconnected. If we do these things, we will point beyond ourselves to God, the God who calls us today. It's a tough mission. It demands our best. And we can't do it alone. We need each other, and we need God. Let's give it our best. It is God's call to us.