

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today could have been a good lesson for Stewardship Sunday. Solomon teaches about the proper attitude about money and wealth, and the proper way to use them ... but we're not ready for that. Moreover, today's Gospel follows on the heels of last Sunday's Gospel, with the man whom Jesus told: "*You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me,*" but who "*went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions*" (Mark 10:21-22). At school, our little ones here with us today often put the older children to shame with their generosity. Even if it's only as much as the widow's mite, they bring something to give on chapel day.

Jesus in our Gospel, however, used the occasion of that encounter with the rich man to teach His disciples about the kingdom of God: "*How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*" Temporal blessings like riches and status offer no advantage when it comes to the kingdom of God; indeed, they can be a hindrance. You remember how Luke records Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus was a poor beggar at the rich man's gate. They both died, but of the rich man, Jesus taught that "*Abraham said [to him], 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and ...now ... you are in anguish'*" (Luke 16:25).

But it's not that Jesus has a grudge against the rich. Indeed, He continues to speak more generally. "*Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!*" That is, for anyone ... blessed with wealth, or mired in poverty ... praised by all the powerful, or despised by the cultured elite ... pursued for one's youth and vigor, or ridiculed for one's lowly demeanor.

How difficult is it? Jesus returns to His previous target: "*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*"

What an analogy! I'm not completely inept with a needle and thread. I can sew a button on a shirt. I'm not in any way like Keiko, who was an exquisite seamstress! But a button is not too much for me. Still, it's hard to get a thread through the eye of a needle. My Marge does it with ease — she doesn't even have to look! It doesn't seem possible, but she shows that it is. I, on the other hand, struggle, sighting the hole with one eye, wetting the thread, — yes, one eye closed and my tongue out. I hope that I'm fortunate enough to get it through with just a few attempts and that I don't accidentally pull it back out.

Threading a needle is hard, but Jesus isn't talking about accomplishing something that is hard. He's talking about something that's impossible for man to do. Thus, He talks about getting a camel through the eye of a needle ... impossible. And that's the point. Don't let people try to tell you about a gate in Jerusalem

called “the camel’s gate” or a mountain pass called “the camel’s gate” that people actually went through. No! People who try to explain away the simple meaning of Jesus’ words in this way are trying to take away from their force. And we understand why — people don’t like hearing that they can’t do something. But when it comes to the kingdom of God, that’s exactly what Jesus is saying.

And Jesus is not just talking about rich people. The disciples asked, thinking: “if the rich who are especially blessed by God can’t attain heaven on their own, *‘Who then can be saved?’*” Jesus returns to His more general statement: you can’t ... “*With man it is impossible.*” It’s as Babi and Brooke and John have recently learned it from the Small Catechism (though they weren’t asked to memorize Luther’s explanation): “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him...” (Small Catechism, Article III).

But what is impossible for man is NOT impossible for God, “*for all things are possible with God.*” In fact, when it comes to our relationship with God, from our creation to our redemption to our sanctification, it is all done by Him.

That’s right. “*It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves*” (Ps. 100:3; NKJV); He “*formed my inward parts; [He] knitted me together in my mother’s womb*” (Ps. 139:13) — creation.

“*[He] has redeemed [you] from trouble*” (Ps. 107:2), from your sin, from your rebelliousness, from your corruption, from your certain death. He has redeemed you by the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, for from His virgin birth to His perfect life to His perfect sacrifice, God in Jesus did the impossible for you. “*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s*” (Ps. 103:2-5) — redemption, it’s God’s work.

Again, it wasn’t anything we did, but “*God, our Savior, ... saved us ... according to His mercy*” (Tit. 3:5), for who are we but people born dead in our sins and trespasses, but made alive by God by His grace, “*by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit*” (Tit. 3:5), cleansing waters like those that poured over Babi, and Brooke, and John today, grace received through faith in Christ Jesus — sanctification. God does that for us, too.

Surely, some works God has completed: “*on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.*” And the whole world was redeemed by the once for all sacrifice of Jesus—for this is the way God loved the whole world, that He sent His only-begotten Son to be lifted up on a cross to die. But His work of sanctification is ongoing: individual persons are saved as they come to faith in Jesus, and are preserved in this faith. And this work is God’s work through the Spirit. Here again,

is Luther: “But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith, even as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith” (Small Catechism, Article III).

And so we confess, that even as God’s work of redemption is done, once for all by Jesus, His work of sanctification is ongoing—His work to call us to faith and keep us in the faith. And we acknowledge that this faith is by His grace. These are the promises our confirmands will make today: “Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?” And their answer will be: “I do, by the grace of God.”

And this grace is no abstraction. God uses concrete means to accomplish His impossible work of sanctification; He uses the Word and Sacraments. And that, too, is a promise made at confirmation: “Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully?” And they will answer again, “I do, by the grace of God.”

These means are important in how God keeps us in the faith He created in us by Holy Baptism, and which we affirm at our confirmation. Research studies have documented this among those who claim no religious affiliation, the so-called “n-o-n-e-s”. Across many different demographics, the number of “nones” keeps rising, among both Protestants and Catholics. But the one place where the “nones” are not rising? It’s among those who attend church services regularly — who partake regularly of the means of grace. May He who “*began a good work*” in Babi, Brooke, and John — and in us all — “*bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Phil. 1:6).

Thus, in this prayer and hope, today we rejoice, whether persons rich or poor, powerful or powerless, vigorous or feeble! What is impossible for us, God has already done in Christ Jesus and continues to do for us through His church, through His word, through His sacraments. He saves us by the washing of regeneration, by the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins, by serving us His very Body and Blood in the Supper. God grant that strengthened by these He will keep us steadfast in faith, so that we may follow Him to everlasting life.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.