

# Camels and Locusts

Joel 2:21-27; Mark 10:17-31

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This morning, you have the great fortune of getting two mini-sermons for the price of one! Just in case you needed one more thing to be thankful for today!

We've heard two very different texts. I think they both have a world to speak to us on this Thanksgiving Sunday.

We've heard about a swarm of locusts and about a camel struggling to get through the eye of the needle. Part one of my sermon will focus on the latter, part two on the former.

One of the interesting things about preaching from the lectionary is observing which texts land on which Sundays year to year.

This is the second time in the last decade that the gospel text assigned for Thanksgiving Sunday is the one we just heard. Both times I have been struck, at least on a surface level, by what an inconvenient fit this is!

How to reconcile a Sunday where we focus on being thankful for all our stuff with Jesus' command to go and sell all our stuff?

As we have seen this fall in our trip through Mark's gospel, Jesus says hard things.

A man comes to Jesus with a question. It's an urgent question. The man runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees. This is no matter of idle curiosity.

The question is the biggest one of them all, one that all of us have asked, in some form or another, at various points in our lives: **What must I do to inherit eternal life?**

Jesus responds, as he often does. Surprisingly. Enigmatically (*Why do you call me good?*). Provocatively. And always with an eye to getting at what's behind the question.

He does this in a very interesting way. He points him back to the Jewish law, to the Ten Commandments.

*You know the commandments...*

But it's interesting to note which of the commandments Jesus mentions.

Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honour your father and mother.

He focuses on the commandments that deal with how we are to relate to our fellow human beings, but he leaves aside the first four commandments which deal primarily with how we are to relate to God (*I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other Gods before me... no graven images... don't take the name of the Lord in vain*).

We'll come back to that.

The man responds, "I've done all these things since I was a child." I've played by the rules. And then Jesus exposes what's lurking behind the question.

One thing you lack. Go sell what you own and give the money to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.

At this, the man famously goes away grieving. For he had many possessions.

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*It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The image of a big, lumbering, awkward beast trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle is a comically absurd image, and it's meant to be.

We hear these words, and we squirm. And if we don't, we probably should.

What do we do with this hard thing that Jesus says?

Is Jesus anti-posessions? Does he expect all his followers to be destitute? Is giving thanks for our stuff off limits? Is material poverty a prerequisite for entering the kingdom of heaven?

I don't think so.

I think that if we pay attention to the way this conversation unfolds, we see in telling this man to sell everything and follow him Jesus was steering the conversation toward the commandments that he didn't mention earlier.

Ok, you say you've kept all the commandments since you were a boy. Well, let's see about that. There were a few commandments I didn't mention—commandments that I know that you know, too... Commandments about having no other gods before me, for example.

Let's test your theory that you've kept all the commandments. Sell what you have and follow me.

Jesus' response exposes this man's devotion to his wealth, to his placing his possessions in the place that God alone is worthy of.

The man went away sad, our text says. The text doesn't explicitly say why, although it seems that it was because he wasn't willing to part with his stuff.

This is the most natural interpretation. And it's natural because I think most of us can see ourselves in his sadness, at least on some level.

Why? What is it about stuff that makes it such an alluring idol?

Well, there are many things that we think our stuff gives us.

Security.

Identity.

Status.

Meaning.

Fulfillment.

Happiness.

Validation. A "receipt" for the worthiness of our existence.

How else, after all, do we keep score in life? How else do we know who's doing it right, who's blessed? Wealth is one of the easiest tools we have for evaluating these things, for measuring competence, for seeing who's winning and who's losing.

It is oh so easy to derive our self-worth from our net worth.

Maybe one of the reasons the man in the parable trudged sadly off was because he was fond of his possessions, certainly, but even fonder of the idea that he had earned them.

Maybe that's the eye of the needle that the man struggled so mightily to walk through, the thing that prevented him (and us?) from entering the kingdom of God. The idea that he was the one earning what could only be received as a gift.

This is why Jesus put things as strongly as he does in today's story.

Jesus isn't against possessions. He knows that we need stuff to survive and thrive in the world; he knows that stuff can be a source of pleasure, a celebration of the good things that God has made and has seen fit to give us.

Jesus is against all that would keep us away from the proper love, worship, and trust of God, against all that would place us on the throne of our own lives.

And when our stuff assumes the place of God and God's gifts? Well, then so much the worse for our stuff. Like all idols that take the place of God, it will have to go.

(We're talking about wealth and possessions today because it's the focus of our gospel text, but of course we can make an idol out of pretty much anything. Entertainment, technology, the identities that we construct for ourselves, our own virtue, sports, sex, our children, our bodies... the list could go on and on, for we are very resourceful and inventive idolaters!)

It's interesting to note what comes immediately before Jesus delivers the hammer blow in our gospel text this morning.

Before Jesus tells the rich young man to go sell all his stuff, we read: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him..."

He loved him. It is for love's sake that Jesus says this hard thing (and all hard things).

I want to read the words of Debie Thomas who wrote a wonderful essay on this passage back in 2021. She speaks beautifully and truly about this love:

But notice that Jesus's love doesn't leave the young man where he is. In other words, Jesus's love isn't "nice." **It doesn't prioritize the young man's comfort over his salvation.** Jesus's love is provocative. It's incisive. It's sharp. Even as it offers unconditional welcome, it also offers mind-boggling challenge.

Imagine how easy it would be for Jesus to secure his new convert by mincing words and tamping down expectations: "What? You've already followed the commandments for years? Excellent! And you're already calling me 'good'? Then you must know who I am, because only God is good! Wow! I'm so impressed! You're in!"

Or at the very least, Jesus could work in increments, easing his new convert into the values of God's kingdom: "How about you write a small check to charity this year? Nothing scary, nothing that will break the bank. Just a token?"

But no. **For Jesus, love is surgical; it cuts in order to heal.** Precisely *because* he loves the young man so much, Jesus tells him the truth. Not the half-truth, not the watered-down truth, but the whole truth: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

The challenge of Christianity is that the love that "leads us by the right road" does in fact *lead* us. It leads, it redirects, it corrects, it halts. It doesn't let us do whatever we want and still call ourselves disciples. It doesn't tell us the pleasing lie that we're just fine as we are. **God's provocative love holds a mirror to our delusions, our disordered affections, our broken priorities, and our half-baked commitments. God's love shows us what we really are, not to shame or defeat us, but to deliver us.**<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://journeywithjesus.net/essays/3176-what-must-i-do>

Ok, I want to transition to our first reading from Joel. This text is one that was explicitly assigned for Thanksgiving.

It is a promise of restoration to a beleaguered people.

Anyone feeling beleaguered? If so, you're not alone. Life can feel hard these days. Many people are struggling.

Groceries are expensive. Rents and mortgages are high. Many feel like they're just barely treading water (or thrashing around just beneath the surface).

Many are exhausted by a political climate that seems ever more adversarial and polarizing. Many are wearied and heartbroken by wars in Ukraine and Gaza and Lebanon and beyond and feel utterly helpless to know how to even understand them, much less do something about them.

Others look at the pace of social change and the way big tech has changed how we interact with one another and feel bewildered, barely recognizing the world we are creating.

Still others are just struggling with loss in all the forms that losses show up in our lives.

Maybe you don't feel particularly thankful on this Thanksgiving Sunday. Maybe you're just struggling to get through the day.

If so, perhaps the prophet Joel has a word for you this morning.

Not much is known about Joel, whether the author or the specific time it was written.

We do know that locusts figure prominently in the book of Joel. These locusts seem to function in both a literal and a metaphorical manner.

Joel writes to a people in the context or immediate aftermath of a devastating plague of locusts that has wiped out the harvest. There is nothing left, for livestock or for human beings.

The scene Joel paints is an anguished one, as we heard.

The locusts also seem to be a metaphor for an invading army. Some suggest it's a reference to the Babylonians who will lay siege to Jerusalem in 587 BC.

Like many of the prophets, Joel interprets the advance of enemy armies as the judgment of the Lord, usually for a combination of injustice and idolatry.

But the one thing about the prophets, no matter how much they rail against these things, no matter how dire the judgment that is coming (or has come) is said to be, it *always* comes with the promise of restoration.

This is the context of our reading from Joel 2 today. The Lord promises that the soil and the animals and the fig trees and the vine will be fruitful once more. Empty granaries will be full. The rain will fall once more. Joy will take the place of sorrow.

And then the wonderful words of verse 25: "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten."

It is the promise that God sees us and our situations truly. He knows our idols, yes; but he also knows all that we have been through, all that we have lost, all the things in our lives, whether self-inflicted or not, that have led to seasons that feel barren, bleak, hopeless.

And he promises that this is not the end of the story.

In his book *How to Inhabit Time*, philosopher Jamie Smith talks about the time when he was going through a really hard season in his life and a Christian friend directed him to this passage from the book of Joel:

From my earliest reading in the Gospels, I had come to understand that God knew the number of hairs on my head. But somehow it was a moving revelation to realize that God also saw what I had lived through—that the eternal God understood what I had lost, what had been missing, what the locusts had eaten and left me bereft of. In Joel's prophetic word, I heard a promise of restoration attuned to my history—the promise of an abundant God not only making up for the lack, but wantonly overflowing the cup.<sup>2</sup>

A beautiful hope. And beautifully put.

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<sup>2</sup> James K.A. Smith, *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 172.

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In Mark 10:27, Jesus' disciples are baffled by his teaching to the rich man. *Who can be saved*, they understandably wonder. They know that camels don't fit through eyes of needles!

Jesus responds: "For God, all things are possible."

All. Things.

This, truly, is worth giving thanks for, on Thanksgiving Sunday but also on any day. For God, *all things* are possible.

God can expose our idols. God can surgically expose what is keeping us from faith and trust. God can love us into health and wholeness.

God can also repay what the locusts have eaten. He can heal the wound, redeem the lost time, bring colour and vibrancy to the barren desolate places of our lives.

Jesus looks on us, too. And he loves us.

He also sees what the locusts have eaten. He sees our losses, our sorrows, our failures, the ways in which others have failed us. He sees, perhaps, the years that have been stolen from us or the years we have wasted. He sees the private pains that have piled up over the years. He sees the dead ends that our idols have led us to.

And he promises restoration. Redemption. Wholeness. Forgiveness and flourishing.

In the end, even our idols, whatever they are, even our histories, whatever they have contained, are no match for the piercing, surgical, redemptive love of God.

For this—on this Thanksgiving Sunday—we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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