

Sermon – Mark 10:17-31
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
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“And for My Next Trick...”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I spent my college summers as a camp counselor at Lutheran Bible camps in Wisconsin. I wouldn't trade those experiences for anything, and part of what I loved was helping the boys in my charge love camp as much as I did, or almost. We would reach that point by the end of the week, but it was no easy task, particularly with middle school boys who were only there because their parents dropped them off and drove away before their sons could sneak back into their cars. Attitudinal adjustments were necessary in the face of an overwhelming lack of enthusiasm. The boys didn't want to do anything, and were constantly asking what we were going to be doing next so that they could begin complaining about it. “What do we have to do next,” they would whine. So we would try to subtly shift their perspective from what they *had* to do to what they *got* to do. *We have* to go to arts and crafts? No, you *get* to go to arts and crafts! *We have* to go on a nature hike? No, you *get* to go on a nature hike! *We have* to camp overnight in tents that leak, with a dinner we won't be able to cook because we won't be able to start a fire in the rain, and we'll be cold and miserable and half-dead by morning? No, you *get* to camp overnight in tents that leak, with a dinner you won't be able to cook because you won't be able to start a fire in the rain, and you'll be cold and miserable and half-dead by morning! You don't *have* to do it, you *get* to do it!
2. Starting with what you have to do is a joyless thing, and it misses the point of how Jesus is living and moving in our midst, how God is calling us to live our

lives. This morning, with the young man in the gospel, we ask Jesus, "What must we do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus plays along with the question; have you kept the commandments? Yes? Well, if you want something to do, go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor. Then, Jesus says, come back and follow me. The man leaves, filled with sorrow, and one imagines that Jesus is sad, too. Jesus turns to his disciples and turns up the heat. How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom! It would be easier to pull a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom. It's tempting here to try to walk back Jesus' words. Maybe it's a mistranslation. Maybe Jesus is referring to a gate in the Jerusalem wall known as the eye of the needle that actually was difficult to get a camel through. The disciples, however, feel the full weight of the words. What Jesus is saying is that it is impossible for the rich, and indeed for any of us, to enter the Kingdom. For mortals it is impossible, for there is nothing we can do, should do, or have to do to get us into God's good graces.

3. The point all along, after all, has been to receive the Kingdom like a child, not to work our way in like adults. We're too lost in our sin, too broken by life, too trapped by death to make much of an effort anyway – but Jesus didn't come to show us how to save ourselves; *he came to save us*. You think shoving a camel through a needle's eye is difficult? How about pulling the incarnate Son of God out of heaven, into life and through the tomb of death and back out the other side? It's something that only God can do, and it is, in fact, exactly what God has done. For me, and for you, so that we could stop worrying about what we have to do, and start dreaming about what we can do for the sake of the gospel.
4. This week I received a small package with a return address I didn't recognize. Inside was smaller, padded envelope, and inside that was a third envelop (I was beginning to think that someone might be pulling a prank on me), on the outside of which was written, "From a friend in the Lord." I opened it slowly,

and found this: a small tin plate engraved with the names and pictures of Mr. Schroeder and Pastor Wolter, the second teacher and first pastor of Grace; in the middle is a picture of Grace Lutheran in Oak Park, in our congregation's first building. I had two thoughts in quick succession: First, when is someone going to commission a tin plate with my face and Principal Koehne's face on it? I assume that someone is working on this! But second, I thought of all those people – not just pastors and teachers – but all off those women and men of faith who had freely received the gifts of Christ and strove to freely give and live out those gifts in response, building up this community of faith – first at Augusta and Belleforte, and now here, at Division and Bonnie Brae. We occupy the space – physically and spiritually – created as they built this community. How fitting that they named this community Grace, for it is all grace with a little g; grace all the way down.

5. So now, as we stand face to face with the Jesus who comes to us in grace, let's forget the questions about what we have to do. There's nothing we can do, nothing we need to do, to earn what he has come to give us: life abundant and eternal, mercy and forgiveness, the necessities of life, and the communion of saints that supports and sustains us. There's nothing you need to do! He's gone through the eye of the needle for you, through the cross and the tomb for you. Jesus is the great high priest who has passed through heaven for you, so approach God's throne of grace with boldness. The question in response is not what do you have to do but rather, now that you don't have to do anything, what have you been set free to do for the sake of the Kingdom to which you already belong?
6. So today we hear that it's not that you have to give away everything you have; you *get* to give away everything you have! Next Sunday is Faith Promise Sunday at Grace, and you'll have the opportunity to make promises as to how you'll use your time, talents, and treasure during this year. And I wish I could tell you that you need to give this much or that much to enter the

Kingdom and inherit eternal life. It would, no doubt, be a hugely effective fundraising technique. But it's not how the gospel works. Jesus is already out the other side of the needle, and so are you. There's nothing left for you to do. So, with nothing you have to do, what are you going to do? My hope, my prayer, is that you'll be caught by a vision of the Kingdom in which the other reasonable way to respond to God's reckless and abundant generosity is to behave in the same way, pouring your life into this community so that this community might pour itself out for the sake of the world. For when we're all in, all together, what cannot God do through us? We might never appear on commemorative tin plates, you and I, but we have a legacy to pass on and to live out. Not to prove to God how we love God, but to show those around us and those who come after us how much God loves them. When we're all in, all together, God can use us to end violence the North Lawndale. When we're all in, all together, God can use us to bring the gospel back to Slovakia. When we're all in, all together, we can make sure that no one doesn't know the saving love of Jesus. So give what you've got, a whole life given into the service of Christ. You don't *have* to do it, but you *get* to. And I hope you do. Because I can't think of a better way to live on the other side of the needle, on the far side of death, where there is already life enough for all of us. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.