

“One Thing You Lack”

Zechariah 7:4-12 and Luke 18:18-30

November 13, 2011

In 1206 in the city-state of Assisi, in the region that we know today as Italy, a father took his son to court; it was an ecclesiastical court presided over by a bishop. The father, a man named Pietro Bernardone, sought to discipline his son. Pietro was a wealthy cloth merchant. He was one of the richest men in town; he looked for ways to increase his holdings, to achieve more influence in his city. He wanted his son to continue in that tradition. He had done so many things for his children and this son, who was named Francis, in particular. In his youth Francis seemed to be living the way his father expected, enjoying the fruits of a wealthy life. Francis had been a favorite among the young nobles in Assisi; he was charismatic and indulged in the pleasures of the time. But that life had been interrupted by a war between Assisi and Perugia, a war that had taken Francis out on the battlefield and ended with Francis a prisoner, thrown into a dark dungeon. Pietro had tried all he could to secure the release of his son; in the end, paying a sizable ransom. Pietro and his wife Pica had mourned seeing their son come home, broken, sickly, and depressed. Pietro tried to get Francis to reclaim the privileged life, but now his son was distant and depressed.

There had been some hope when an important nobleman had come through and reignited Francis' longing to become a knight, but it was not long before Francis returned, saying that he had a dream telling him to remain in Assisi. Then Francis, to his father's great concern, started to spend time among the lepers outside Assisi. Why would his son risk his life? There was no cure for leprosy. And then Francis had started to sell what his father had worked hard to obtain. Francis had sold the horse and armor his father had given him, taken some colored drapery from his father's shop, and sold all these, only to leave the money at dilapidated church outside Assisi. Then he had disappeared for a month, only to emerge all muddied, an object of ridicule in the town. Pietro had dragged his son home, beaten him, and thrown him in a closet. After returning home from a business trip to discover that his wife Pica had released Francis, Pietro decided to take his son to court; he wanted his son to give up his inheritance. Pietro was no longer going to invest in this child.

This exchange at court would become a defining point in Francis' life. His father was arguing how his son had spurned his inheritance. Pietro was publicly saying that his son was an embarrassment. In the midst of this discussion, the crowd started laughing, for Francis was removing his clothes. He took off everything, for these had come from his father. He placed the pile before his father and said that he

no longer laid any claim to his father's wealth. The people gathered there that day could not understand what was going on. Many probably said that Francis had gone insane--that he just was never himself again after that year of imprisonment. But Francis himself was coming to Christ. His conversion involved abandoning the privileged life of his youth. From this point forward, Francis adopted a life of simplicity and poverty. He worked with the lepers; he begged in the streets; he lived among the poor. Francis read the Gospels, and the call of Christ transformed his life.

At the center of his conversion, leading to his abandoning wealth to take up a life of poverty, was the story of the rich ruler who comes to Jesus and Jesus' own words, "Sell everything that you have and give to the poor." We find accounts of this encounter in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The conversation begins when the rich ruler runs out to grab Jesus. We know very little about him. We do not know his name, his background, or really what he does. We just know that he has influence and money; he is a leader in his society. He has sought Jesus out because he has an important question; he drives straight to the point, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life."

Many of those who came to Jesus arrived with questions to challenge, to undermine Jesus' ministry, but this man asks sincerely. Yet there are some flaws to his thinking, and Jesus quickly exposes them. Jesus first questions the

man about his understanding of good; God alone is good. This response could be taken as a sign of humility pointing to God the Father, or it could have been a way for Jesus to lead the wealthy man to consider the significance of his statement--much like Jesus would do with his disciples when he asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus wants the man to understand that the title "good" should not be given lightly.

Then Jesus moves to illuminate another flaw in the question. The man has said, after all, "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" Jesus reminds the wealthy man that Jews have the Ten Commandments to guide them. Jesus specifically quotes from the last six commandments that have to do with human relationships: Honor your father and mother. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not give false testimony. Jesus lists five of the six, leaving out, "Do not covet." There were many laws governing Jewish society, but the Ten Commandments were the heart of the Jewish covenant. They told the Jewish people what they were supposed to do.

The ruler then seeks to defend his question. He has done those very things since his youth. He has kept the law. He may have been thinking, "Is that it? Isn't there something else? Isn't there one great, good thing that I can do to gain eternal life?" Here we should also realize that the ruler's question has to do with a life in fellowship with God, a life

that we can share in the present as well as the future. The ruler is looking for something new, yet Jesus points him to the traditional. The answer does not seem to satisfy him.

Mark tells us at this point that Jesus loves the man; Jesus is moved by the man's earnest searching, yet Jesus knows there is something else. Jesus responds with words that have become well-known, "One thing you lack. Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." *One thing you lack*. These could be hopeful words at first. The ruler is listening: Is this the answer to his question? Is this the one great thing that he can do to earn eternal life? But once the words sink in, the man realizes what Jesus is asking of him. The words are too heavy. He is not willing to do this; he has grown up with wealth. Does he have to give up all of it? But Jesus is serious. Mark and Matthew tells us that the man walks away in great sadness, realizing that he cannot live out the answer to his question.

Yet Luke suggests that there is more to the encounter, that Jesus looks directly at him and says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!" There is no dodging the issue here. Throughout the Gospel of Luke we find Jesus emphasizing the dangers of wealth. There are many images of judgment falling on the rich: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." Jesus' parable about the unnamed rich man and the poor man named

Lazarus after death places the rich man in a flamed torment and the poor man in a place of comfort with Abraham. All these images add up, and here we have a rich man who cannot relinquish his wealth when Jesus told him in person what he was to do.

Jesus says that 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's going on here? Jesus gives us an image that it is so exaggerated that it seems ridiculous. Some who have read this passage have tried to offer explanations, saying that the Greek word for "camel" and the Greek word for "rope" only differ in one letter, that rope makes more sense here. Others have tried to argue that there was a door in the city of Jerusalem referred to as the "eye of the needle"--that camels could only get through by kneeling down. Yet there is no strong evidence for these attempts to soften the exaggeration. What is Jesus trying to communicate here anyway? Jesus wants to give an image of something that is impossible--thus he takes the largest animal living around them, a camel, and has it trying to travel through the smallest passage then imaginable, the eye of the needle. Jesus here is exposing the last flaw in the man's question. Human beings cannot do anything to earn eternal life. A camel cannot pass through the eye of the needle. A rich man cannot buy his way into God's Kingdom.

What is the problem with riches? They create a sense of complacency. They tie us to this fallen world, and we do not yearn for God's Kingdom. We think that we are self-sufficient; we do not have to step out on faith; we do not have to rely on God's grace. Here we might think again of Pietro Bernardone, the wealthy Italian merchant. He resisted his son's generosity to the poor. He claimed that the wealth was his. Those in Jesus' time had a similar view of wealth; they saw it as a sign of God's blessings. God honored people by giving them wealth, and they were to enjoy it. Yet Jesus was here saying that that was not the case. Wealth becomes one of the greatest idols pulling people from God.

Those gathered around Jesus, who witnessed this exchange, then start to worry. The gate seems too narrow. How can anyone find salvation then? Jesus here preaches the need to rely on God's grace. We cannot do anything to inherit eternal life. Communion with God is not something that we earn from doing great deeds. God reaches out to us, and that relationship of grace and mercy transforms us. Yet there are sacrifices that those who follow Jesus make. Jesus asks us to take up our crosses and to follow him. We no longer belong to this world. Peter asks Jesus what will happen to those who have abandoned earthly things to follow him, and Jesus acknowledges these sacrifices, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive

many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life." We do not undertake the life of discipleship for the sake of receiving this reward; we follow Jesus out of obedience, because he calls us. There are sacrifices in earthly terms, but then there are blessings untold--in the present and in the days of the new heaven and new earth. By God's grace, we share in the joys of God's Kingdom.

St. Francis read this passage about the rich ruler closely. He also read the accounts of Jesus' sending his disciples out on missionary work. He asked them not to carry silver or gold with them; they were to go with no extra shirt, sandals, or staff. Francis saw himself in the role of the rich young ruler. The indulgent life of his youth did not have any substance. When he was in prison, fearing for his life, wondering if he would ever see the light of day, he began to wonder if there was anything more important to life. Francis read these passages literally and took a plunge. He renounced the wealth that would have guaranteed him a life of pleasures and ease, to walk around barefooted in a simple robe, begging for food for the poor in his community, reaching out to the lepers that everyone else avoided. Others in Francis' generation were inspired by his example and sought to take up a similar life. The group would grow and expand into the monastic tradition in the Catholic Church. Today there are Franciscans involved in social ministries reaching out to many people wrestling with poverty.

There is a radical difference between a poverty that you have willingly taken up and a poverty that has descended on you, or has always been with you, because of circumstances that are beyond your control. Francis' example, though, speaks to many of us who live in the United States today. Despite the economic challenges of the last few years, most Americans still live privileged lives. I have brought the story of St. Francis to students at Anderson University and here at Francis Marion and asked them what they thought about his life. There are some who are very vocal, saying that Francis chose a life that we cannot follow, that there is nothing wrong with money--it is the love of money that is the problem. Many who followed Francis wanted to soften the lifestyle as they created the monastic order. There were church leaders who disagreed with him, yet Francis insisted that Jesus was calling him to live the simple life.

I am not convinced that we all have to go as far as Francis either, yet I do think that we should tell Francis' story to provide a corrective to a culture that is materialistic. We have grown up in a culture that teaches us to be consumers; it is so easy to become a part of it, particularly this time of the year when we are thinking about Christmas presents. I am reminded of a line in the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. Charlie Brown is talking to his sister Sally; she is writing a letter to Santa Clause, and he questions what she needs. She

responds, "All I want is my fair share." Whether we voice it or not, I think that many in the United States have a similar feeling. We are looking for our share of things. Thus, I am not certain that we are always aware when we have let material concerns cloud out our spiritual lives, when we spend more time thinking about money than we do praying to the God who created us. We should remember that Jesus himself said that it is very difficult for a rich person to enter into God's Kingdom, yet God can bring us around too. God will show us where our priorities should lie. God's Spirit will convict us when we are squandering our money. Do we really need to accumulate more things? Can we give more to the poor and needy around us? Wealth can be channeled in way to benefit others. It is just that there are so many temptations. Francis' leap of faith into a life of poverty seems so strange to us, yet there is no ambiguity in it. We who live in a world of possessions have a number of temptations.

Here we turn to the selection from the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah was speaking to the people of Israel in a challenging day: they returned from exile, trying to rebuild Jerusalem, facing the dangers of famine. There was poverty in the land; the people did not know if God would ever bless them. God asks them if they are eating only for themselves--are they only concerned with finding pleasures for themselves. God asks them to be concerned for others: "Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one

another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.”

God calls Israel, and us Americans today, to seek true justice in the distribution of our wealth; God wants us to share the love we have received from Him. God wants us to take care of the needy in our midst. So it is important that we are directing money toward the care of others. It is important for us to ask ourselves today, if we were to stand before Jesus and say that we had done our best to be his disciples, to follow his teachings, would he also tell us, “One thing you lack.” We need humbly to seek God’s guidance in this matter, as in all others; for in Christ, all things are possible. Can we live more simply, so that we can give more to others? Christ promises that any sacrifices we make for the sake of God’s Kingdom will lead to blessings we could not predict. It is a difficult path, but those who travel it will never regret.

Zechariah 7:4-12

4 Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: 5 “Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? 6 And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? 7 Are these not the words the LORD proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?’”

8 And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: 9 “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. 10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’

11 “But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and covered their ears. 12 They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry.

Luke 18:18-30

18 A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

19 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. 20 You know the commandments:

‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.’[a]”

21 “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, 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.”

26 Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?”

27 Jesus replied, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”

28 Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!”

29 “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”