

Margreta Silverstone: The Call to Commitment for Entering the Kingdom of God

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The Call to Commitment for Entering the Kingdom of God

I grew up in a Christian family and have heard some Scripture readings so many times. The gospel reading is one of them. Familiarity makes it hard to breathe new life into a passage, to find new meaning.

What can I say about the rich man? Or about the imagery Jesus uses to liken the rich man to a camel? There have been various interpretations on whether the eye of the needle really is the eye of a needle or a mistranslation of “needle’s eye” gate. Most cities had such a small gate near the main entrance. It served as a way for people to be able, under some circumstances, to enter the city after the main gate was closed for the night. While it has been intellectually interesting to read the debate, I haven’t discovered anything in the discourse that really makes a difference in my life.

The discourse did invite me to see if there was another way to enter the story presented here. Was there a small gate to the side of the main focus? And, I think I found one in the conversation between Peter and Jesus.

Peter blurts out, “We have left everything to follow you!”

Jesus responds, “The truth is, there is no one who has left

home, sisters or brothers, mother or father, children or fields for me and for the sake of the Gospel who won't receive a hundred times as much in this present age – as many homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, children and property, though not without persecution – and, in the age to come, everlasting life.”

Huh? How is this possible? What is Jesus saying?

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is often trying to reveal the “Kingdom or kindom of God.” This passage is yet another attempt. The kindom of God is not just a concept for the age to come. Jesus invited Peter to see the riches he had already gained from giving up everything to follow him. The kindom of God, in this day, is made up of boundless relationships to others. The kindom of God, here today, provides us places to call home. The kindom of God provides us relationships to others which have the strength and meaning of family. The kindom of God gives us the riches of God's creation.

[Last week](#), David talked to us about relationships; our primary relationships to God and our family of origin and our secondary relationships to community. Here, Peter is telling Jesus about the dedication, or commitment, he has to the primary relationship with God. He had given everything. Jesus' response identified that Peter's choice was transforming other relationships. Peter had entered into a kindom where all relationships carry the force and strength of family.

I don't know if I've passed through a narrow gate, the eye of a needle, or a dark tunnel but the vision of the kindom of God on the other side is dazzling. And the kindom of the God is here.

In the years that I have been worshipping here at Seekers, there are many times where I have seen that transformative relationship occurring. I witness it in Mary Carol's relationship to Joyce. I witness it in Roy, Cathy, Jean and

others in their relationships to South Africa and Tumulung. I see it in Cynthia and the women of N Street. I have personally felt that transformation in [my relationships with the people of Guatemala](#).

This summer, you heard a number of stories from the people who went on the trip to Guatemala. You've already heard how [Marjory felt close](#) to Jesus and to the family of God there. You've [heard from Sandra](#) about the experience as well. And, you heard [vignettes](#) from some of the rest of us. You also have the opportunity to read the [Faith at Work](#) magazine for other stories about this trip. I wish to give you just a taste of what was important for me.

Having this be the second time, I found myself not as amazed by the surroundings. The first time, everything was new and everything was equally amazing. Now, it was like having a depth perception. The political climate in the country is more troubling than it was a year ago. The systemic problems seemed more pronounced.

Each time that I have gone to Guatemala, I have been challenged particularly by the work of [The Potter's House](#). They try and serve the treasures, the scavengers of the Dump. They have a micro-enterprise program; they have an education program; they have a food program providing lunches to students and the scavengers. And they offer evangelistic activities; their faith commitment to God is center and primary.

In a recent summer storm, a number of families experienced flooding of their homes and we were tasked to help them. Part of that help was to dig a trench for the water to escape the next time. Part of that help was to paint their shacks. I was in the painting group. But, I couldn't understand why we were doing this or what the message would be. For me, I only paint my walls if I am staying somewhere for a while. Did we really want to be giving the message of permanency to people in these

conditions? How does this encourage them to have hope to get out? But, the Potter's House wasn't trying to be an organization providing a program of painting houses. It came down to people and to love. Edgar and Gladys, whose love of God is primary, were reaching out to the neighbors in love. They were doing this because they cared for these people and could perform this service now. On the dump, there was very little sense of community. Edgar and Gladys were and are trying to create it, trusting that their love of God will bring the kingdom of God to the dump.

In the village, we worked with the community to build the school. We dug the foundation. We filled wheel barrels with the dirt and clay from the trench and tossed it down the mountainside. We mixed and poured concrete. We tied rebar. We worked long hours and the village worked even longer hours to make the building, the school, take shape. When we came we had been welcomed with a great deal of fanfare and festivity. The ceremony was broadcasted over the local radio station. When we left, we were invited to their gathering place, one surrounded by trees and with a beautiful view of the mountains. When we got off of the bus, the children greeted each one of us with a resounding hello. Here the women served us directly. They gave to us cups filled with a hot fruit soup. I never tasted something so delicious. I was warmed by the soup and I was warmed by their generosity.

With such enticement, such possibilities, such relationships of belonging in the kingdom of God possible, how does someone enter?

Peter said that he had left everything and followed Jesus. In the conversation with the rich man, Jesus had suggested that the man, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor; then come, follow me."

Jesus asked for commitment. The commitment needed to enter the kingdom of God was more than that needed for the observance of

the Ten Commandments. The rich man felt safe in his observance of the rules and the level of commitment needed for that. But, for Jesus, that level of commitment wasn't enough. Jesus asked for a total commitment, one that involved giving up riches and choosing to follow.

For me, the thought of giving up my riches and following God is not an easy one. I find myself identifying more with the rich man who went away sad than with Peter who had given up everything to follow Jesus. I've worked hard to achieve what I have and don't relish losing it.

In small ways, this past year has been about choosing to follow. Working in the internal systems of the [Administration for Children and Families](#), part of Health and Human Services, was no longer challenging or fulfilling. I had "lost my way." It was hard to see how keeping web servers operational, creating a strategic plan for consolidating IT resources and managing the development of a web-based application for the solicitation and selection of people for special awards had any bearing on serving the needy, any connection with children and families who needed help, any connection with the poor.

In March, I switched jobs. While still not directly serving the poor, I can see my way to serving the needy. In twelve States, I play a behind the scenes role in providing federal funds and assistance to help the States create and operate computer systems that support social workers in providing services to children in need to protection from abuse and neglect, to parents in need of guidance, to children in foster care. In most States, I am working with equally commitment individuals who care about the children and families in their State. I am paid well to do this job.

We don't know anything about how the rich man earned his income. He may have felt that he had earned his income in ways equally as honorable as mine. It doesn't matter. Jesus knew that the love this man had for his possessions was a barrier

to his participation in the kingdom of God.

As Jesus points out, material riches are barriers for many to participating in the kingdom of God. In part, riches divert one's attention from their commitment to the primary relationship with God. But, I also think that riches represent a way of being in the world that is contrary to that kingdom. This was also part of Jesus' response to the rich man; he was asked to sell his possessions to give the money to the poor. Jesus wanted him to change the nature of the relationships he had with others, particularly the poor. The structures that create wealth may involve power and inequality. The structures that create wealth may rely on deception. The structures that create wealth may break the Ten Commandments and stand in the way of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself.

I know that my current position has its share of opportunity to sin. I hold a position of power in my job. While it is my boss who signs the letters, I am the one drafting it and determining if the State should get the federal funds or not. Both in the letters and in the relationships I have with the State officials, I could be greedy and demand more work and effort from a State before giving them the funds. I have opportunities for deception and misrepresentation, either to misrepresent the State's issues to those above me or to misguide the States. Maybe those choices wouldn't fleece my pockets but I am making decisions involving millions of dollars.

The handling of wealth is a siren song to my soul, luring me to think of myself as better, wiser, worthier than others. That song can steer me off course. That song can break my relationship and commitment to God.

Jesus knew the power of the siren song. That's why he said it would be hard for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. And he gave the colorful analogy of this being as difficult as a camel going through the eye of the needle; or, if you use

another translation, a camel crawling through the narrow Needle's Eye gate.

And the listeners in the gospel reading wondered how it would be possible for anyone to enter the kingdom of God. "For mortals it is impossible – but not for God. With God all things are possible." And Peter blurts out, "We have left everything to follow you!"

Here I see the possibility for some humor in the story. Jesus could have just as easily said, "Yes, Peter, you prove my point." When Peter and his brother were fishing, it was the enticement and invitation of Jesus that compelled him to leave his boat and nets to follow.

Jesus wasn't completely anti-wealth. Jesus was against anything that would stand in the way of the commitment to God. Jesus didn't ask Zaccheus to give up all his wealth when he came to visit. But, Jesus did let Zaccheus see a bit of what the kingdom of God would be like. Zaccheus' response to that vision was volunteering to give away his wealth in order to follow Jesus and to continue living with the vision of the kingdom of God. Zaccheus is another example of how, with God, all things are possible. The ability to commit to the primary relationship between us and God is possible.

In my job, I find I do need to rely on my faith to resist the siren song. While I don't rely on the "What Would Jesus Do" slogan, I do try to choose the loving thing. It isn't easy to see which option is best. Prayer is often a backdrop to my decision making. I am reassured by knowing there are fellow Seekers facing the same siren song and making decisions. Seeing glimpses of kingdom of God here in Seekers provides me with an image of what to work towards in the other places in the world.

So, we come full circle in the text where Jesus reminds Peter of what he has gained by the choice to follow, a place of

belonging in the kingdom of God. And Jesus offers to us the same choice he offered the rich man. If, with God's help, we choose our commitment to God as primary and are willing to give up whatever may stand in our way, we are welcomed as family into this kingdom.