

Sunday, March 28, 2004

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



The Kingdom of Thingdom

Matthew 19:16-30

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God, pour through me the gift of preaching that these words might truly be your living word to us. We know they will be for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of the God revealed in Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I am absolutely intrigued by the phenomenon of Starbucks coffee. Everywhere you go there is a Starbucks coffee shop. You can't go anywhere without seeing one. If you were to walk out the front door of this beautiful sanctuary and walk three blocks in any direction you would run into a Starbucks. I counted seven Starbucks within three blocks of this place. And I frequent every one of them! My favorite Starbucks is right down here on Lexington Avenue between 54th and 53rd.

On Sunday mornings and during the week, if I time it right there are so many Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church people in there that I can make at least five pastoral calls. I just go from table to table to table.

But what's amazing is that when you go into Starbucks you don't just order coffee. You don't just order decaf or regular with cream and sugar or just black as in most coffee shops. In Starbucks you've got to be really sharp. You've got to learn the lingo if you want to order at Starbucks. The truth is there are 128 different ways to have your coffee and it's so complex that they even give you this little booklet, "Make it Your Drink." I'm not making this up! Here it is! I've read this booklet thoroughly and now I can go in and say I want an iced-decaf-triple grande-cinnamon-nonfat-no whip-mocha, with legs. People say, with legs? And, I say, yeah, to go. Hallelujah!

I've been reading Consuming Faith by Tom Beaudoin. In his book Beaudoin talks about corporate branding. Many of you know about corporate branding – it's a phenomenon of our time. People buy a brand. A brand carries with it not only a logo or an insignia but an image. At the early service today we had 40 high school

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students from Doylestown, Pennsylvania worshipping with us. They represent a new generation called Generation Y. Generation X is people in the 20s and early 30s but Generation Y is people who are 21 and under.

Ninety-two percent of Generation Y makes their purchases by branding. In other words they buy brand. They don't want just athletic gear. They want Nike. They want to see the swoosh. If you ask them what Nike stands for they can give you the image that is associated with Nike. Do you know that a ten-year-old child knows 300 brand names – ten years old! What is most fascinating to me about branding is that people don't choose a product because of the quality or the price, they choose a product because of the image. Product manufacturers know if they can get you to buy into the image, the issues of price and quality don't matter as much. They know that you want to be associated with the image.

So recently I talked to a good friend of mine who is a car dealer, because my son Toby was thinking about buying a car. Toby has graduated from law school and has just a little bit of debt. My friend said to me, "Well, Toby is now a corporate lawyer. He works for a law firm in Dallas He's in his late 20s. He probably wants a BMW." I said, "I don't think he can afford a BMW." He said, "You know it really doesn't matter whether he can afford it or not. That's why people lease a car. You don't have to put a lot of money down. You don't have to buy the car. You lease the car and you've got the image." Then I said, "Is it the best value for the price?" And he said, "Listen to me, Toby's not interested in the quality.

There are actually better quality cars for less money. He's not as interested in the quality or as in the image." I said to myself, "Oh no, not Toby, he's interested in quality. He's interested in price." So I called Toby, "Hey Toby, what kind of car are you thinking about getting?" And Toby said, "Oh, thinking about buying a BMW." I said, "Do it with your own money, buster!"

Image is very important. Tom Beaudoin says in his book, "You are what you consume." We're not the only ones interested in image. That rich young man in Matthew 19 is interested in image too. He is very tied to his image as a person with money and he's got a lot of money. He's on a spiritual quest and he says to Jesus, "What must I do to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven?" See, right away you know, he's in the Kingdom of Thingdom because in the Kingdom of Thingdom we think about achieving something, buying something, earning something, getting something. What must I do to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven? He has a lingo just like Starbucks has a lingo. His lingo is Kingdom of Thingdom lingo. You do it and you get in. You earn it and the door opens.

Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is different. It's a kingdom of grace. It can't be earned. But Jesus is too good a teacher to tell him that right away. He lets the young man discover it for himself. Jesus says, "Well, obey the Commandments." "Which ones?" the young man asks. "Well, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not bear false witness." The young man responds, "All these I have obeyed since my youth. What do I still lack?" I think he knew he was missing something. I think he felt envy. I think something wasn't right in his life. Jesus says, "Look, if you would be complete, sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and then come and follow me. You'll have treasure in heaven." The young man said, "I can't do that. I have many possessions." And he went away sorrowful because his possessions were so many he couldn't let go of them. He couldn't let go of the image of himself as a wealthy person.

Today on this historic morning when we end our marvelous journey in this gorgeous Synagogue and we go back home next Sunday to Fifth Avenue and 55th Street, I want to lift up three words that I believe really cut to the heart of what this scripture is all about. Three words that also have a particular meaning for you and me at this important historic moment in our church's life when we return home.

Identity

The first word is Identity. Who are you? What does your identity come from? I'm the Senior Pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. I'm the Cantor at Central Synagogue. I'm the Director of Marketing for Goldman

Sachs. I'm the head of the Weill Cornell Medical School. I'm a doctor. I'm an architect. Is that who you are? Or is your identity something deeper? The young man in the story had bought into an image that had identified him as a wealthy young man. He couldn't let go of it. One of the great things Jesus teaches us – listen carefully – is anything you can't let go of really owns you. If you hold on to it too tightly, you lose it any way. Jesus is not saying to the young man that money is bad or that riches are evil. He is saying, hold on to them loosely. Give them away. Invest them and they will come back to you in opening up a new relationship with God. But the young man's identity was so caught up in wealth and money that he couldn't let go of it.

One of the greatest lessons we have learned in this time out of our own building is that God doesn't reside in a place. Do you know that over half of these 81 new members who joined Fifth Avenue today have never worshipped at Fifth Avenue and 55th Street? Next week will be their first time. I hope they like it by the way! They didn't join a building. They joined a community of faith. That's what Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is. I love our building, built in 1875. It's exquisite. But the building is not us. It's simply the place we worship and we don't worship a building. Our identity comes from knowing God and knowing one another.

On Ash Wednesday many of you came forward at Central Presbyterian Church and held out your hand and we renewed your baptismal vows. Jan and Randy and Oscar and Nora took water and put it on your hand and they said, "Remember your baptism. You are a child of God." They didn't say, "You're a doctor, an architect, a manager." They said, "You are a child of God." If we've learned nothing else being out of the building, may we always remember that place doesn't tell us who we are. God defines our identity.

Impossibility

The second word after Identity is the word Impossibility. This is a word we don't like to hear, but Jesus uses it in this text today. Impossibility. Jesus was the master teacher and always welcomed an opportunity to do a little mentoring. As this rich young man approaches Jesus, the disciples are gathered around eavesdropping on the conversation. When the young man goes away sorrowful, Jesus knows the teaching moment has come. He turns to his disciples and he says "It will be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Scholars and theologians and Biblical authorities for many years have puzzled over that text. Some have said that at night in Jerusalem the main gates are not open, only a very small gate known as the Needle's Eye is open. People would have to bend down to get through

that gate and a camel, who is big, would have to get on his knees and crawl through, but I don't think that's what Jesus meant. As I studied the text what I think Jesus meant is what he said. 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. Now the camel was the biggest of all the beasts at that time in Palestine and the eye of a needle is the smallest of all openings. It's impossible for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle! And it's impossible for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Now Jesus's disciples scratched their heads and said, "Wait a minute Lord, wait a minute, then who can be saved?" And Jesus said, "With people it's impossible." I think he let that word sit there. Impossible. And then he said, "But with God, all things are possible."

Have you ever had an experience of grace in your life? What the Kingdom of Thingdom is all about is earning something – merit, achievement, you earn it, you work hard for it, you get it. That's the Kingdom of Thingdom. But the Kingdom of God is not about achievement. It's about grace. It's about recognizing that all of life is a free, unmerited gift of grace. Suzanne and I experienced a moment of grace over Thanksgiving weekend. We had a wonderful weekend with Toby in Dallas, Texas. We were flying home on the 1:00 pm flight on Sunday afternoon. We got to the airport an hour or so ahead of time and were told the flight was very full.

Then about 30 minutes before the flight an announcer came onto the loudspeaker and said, "We really oversold this flight. Is there anybody who would be willing to take a \$400 voucher and go on the flight that would leave at 5:30?" Now the wheels started turning in Suzanne's mind. She's thinking to herself with \$400 I can go to see my grandchildren and she leans over to me and says, "Honey, what do you say? You could read your book. We could talk. I could knit. We could get something to eat. We could easily kill 4 ½ hours and \$400 would pay for us to go down and see Ryan and Holly and the kids." So we signed up. We got the paper. They gave us the voucher. They signed it. We signed it. Now we've got 4 ½ hours to kill. Everybody gets on the airplane and Suzanne and I are still sitting there.

Then the woman who gave us the voucher came over and said, "Do you folks have all your stuff with you?" "Yes," we said, "Everything is right here. We've got 4 ½ hours to kill now." And she said, "Would you still like to make that 1:00 flight. "Well yes", we said, "But we have this voucher." And she said, "Oh no, the voucher is yours. Would you like to keep the voucher and go on the 1:00 flight?" I said, "Well, why not?" So Suzanne and I walked over and were about ready to get on, when the woman added, " By the way, would you folks mind sit-

ting together?" I said, "Would you mind if we hugged you?" When we called Toby and told him this wonderful story, he said, "Dad that could only happen to a minister!"

The truth is that was a moment of grace – pure, unmerited grace. The truth is every moment of life is pure, unmerited grace. In the Kingdom of Thingdom we think, oh, I've earned it. I've paid for that ticket. It's mine. But who gave us the mind and the ability to work? Who gave us creativity? Who gave us eyesight? Who gave us hands? Who gave us all these things? Everything we've got is a gift of grace. If we just open our eyes, we'll see that every moment is a moment of grace. You can't earn your way into the Kingdom of Heaven. It's a free, unmerited, gift of grace. Whether we're rich or poor, we've got to receive it as a gift. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to receive something you don't deserve. Identity. Impossibility.

Independence

And the third word is Independence. This rich young man was independent. He had his money. He had all that he needed. One of the reasons that being rich is an impediment to spirituality is that you can think you're self-sufficient. You can think you're independent. Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church is the largest congregation in our Presbytery and one of the largest in the Northeast. We could think we're independent. We don't need anybody else. But the truth is we need the Presbytery of New York City. We couldn't borrow money for our expansion and renovation project without the approval of the Presbytery. We couldn't call a pastor without the approval of the Presbytery. We submit to the will of the Presbytery like everybody else.

We may think we're independent but we're not – we're interdependent. Being out of our building has been such a reminder. Where would we have been were it not for Central Synagogue? Where would we have been without Saint Peter's Church and Central Presbyterian Church? We need one another and we've learned that, but it's so easy to go through life thinking you're independent. This is why the One Great Hour of Sharing offering next week is so important. Some of that offering will go to help the people of Madagascar who have recently suffered from devastating cyclones. We've got sisters and brothers in Madagascar. We are them; they are us. We're connected. Reverend Randy Weber will be leading a mission trip to Madagascar after Easter. The group will take money and supplies to the good people of Madagascar. We're one with them. We're not independent of them. We're interdependent. We're in solidarity with them.

I close by saying to Rabbi Zlotnick and Cantor Cahana, we no longer see ourselves as a congregation

independent of you. We see ourselves as one with you. As we go forth into the future, we have fallen completely in love with this congregation. We've fallen in love with this Sanctuary. We've really fallen in love with that Pavilion. People are working now to dig a tunnel between Fifth Avenue and Lexington Avenue so that we can come over for coffee hour week after week. I only wish we could!

We've also fallen in love with the faithfulness of the people of Central Synagogue – your traditions and your symbols. Every time we hear that Jewish people are suffering or feel maligned or are hurt, we're in solidarity with you. When you're offended, we're offended. When

you're broken, we're broken. When you weep, we weep. We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future. The name of the one who holds the future is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Sarah and Rebekah. The God we believe in who is revealed in Jesus the Christ. So we pledge to join all of you at Central Synagogue not in building the Kingdom of Thingdom but in giving our life to building the only thing that's going to last anyway, the Kingdom of God. May it be so. Amen.

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on CD or cassette tape .
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