

## Proper 23B; Mark 10:17-31

The Pixar movie *Up* is centered around an older man named Carl Fredricksen and a very earnest young scout named Russell. After his beloved wife Ellie dies, Carl sets out to fulfill their lifelong dream to see a place called Paradise Falls in South America. He does this by tying thousands of balloons to the house he and Ellie met in and lived their entire lives together in (hence the movie's name). Young Russell, who is desperate in an incredibly sincere way, wants to receive his "assisting the elderly badge," and he inadvertently comes along for the ride. Like many good animated movies, *Up* functions on many different levels, and this movie is this funny, powerful meditation on love, on adventure, on relationships, and on material things, and it dovetails in interesting ways with the Gospel text we just heard.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recount a version of this story, the story of the righteous, good man coming to Jesus and asking what he needs to do in order to inherit eternal life. This passage from Mark for today is probably the most well known version, likely due to not one but two great one-liners: "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." And, of course, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." So let's look at these zingers.

"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." Suffice it to say that Jesus is speaking in a hyperbole to communicate his point, to underline the difficulty of following Christ in the real world. And, make no mistake about it, though those of us here today, because of our access to education, to shelter, to food, and to medical care, we are all fairly rich by the world's standards. Throughout the Gospels, not just here but probably most pointedly here, Jesus constantly reminds his listeners that material things cannot permanently fill any holes we may have in our hearts or our souls. Material goods have this capacity to give us a false sense of security. Jesus knows that about us as humans, and he questions us about it. Wealth is often more concrete in a way that God sometimes is not, and thus they can be an attractive stand-in. That's really it. That's really the bottom line. And preview of coming attractions, next week Jesus talks about power and prestige not being good stand-ins for God either. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus knocks down our idols like toddlers knock over blocks.

So in *Up* Carl's house is this beautiful reminder of those whom he loves and all the wonderful times he and his wife Ellie had together. It really is. Carl's material things provide the backdrop of a life that he loved. Honestly, when I think about the movie now, it's a painful reminder of how inaccessible buying a home is to younger generations and how it takes a higher and higher income to afford what used to be any house at all, a place to build

these kinds of memories like Carl, in a way that was not true 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30, 40, 50 years ago. There are ways in which material items like homes can be grounding. And yet at the same time, the darker side of ownership comes through very clearly. Once the balloons start popping, which balloons are wont to do, the house, which used to be a vehicle of freedom, becomes a burden. Carl even tries to attempt to lug through the jungle. Carl even chooses to endanger his companions in order to try and save his stuff. Carl is weighed down by his things in both physical and metaphorical ways.

To return to the Scripture, "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: what may not be immediately evident is this: Jesus is implicitly questioning a long-held value of the ancient Greek, Roman, and Hebrew world, the world of which he is a part, that "material prosperity was widely seen as a reward or byproduct for spiritual virtue." Things go well for those who are good, and poorly for those who are bad. This is attested to in, for example, the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus really calls this into question. The rich are not more blessed. When I say it like that, it's easy to brush off, like, "Of course not!" The disciples for once bless their hearts should be confused, because this goes against everything they've known their entire lives. The radicality of this notion is emphasized when the disciples say, "Well, then, who can be saved?"

This is where that other famous quote comes in: "For God all things are possible." Today's Scripture isn't only about wealth. In many ways also about that quintessential leap of faith. The disciples had already taken a leap of faith, which Peter alludes to when he says, in so many words, "Look, Jesus, we left everything behind and followed you." They had left their homes, their families, their jobs, everything.

How do we take a leap of faith like the disciples? Well, I wonder if we underestimate ourselves at times, thinking that it's always other people who do great things, people in books, people who are saints who are courageous, not people we know, and definitely not us. I think many of you have already shown the capacity to take a leap of faith simply by being here, leaning in here, giving here, at a time when belonging to worshipping communities is not a given. Such leaps of faith can be so important in life, and not just the outcome driven ones that are obviously the right move in retrospect. What I mean is: I think in common parlance it's only been considered a leap of faith if it works out, if we "get it right," if the new job works out, find a new hobby later in life. Not so. Jesus reminds us today that worldly success and God's blessing don't always go together, that the way the world defines success is certainly not the divine definition of success. Sometimes the taking the chance itself that is in and of itself awesome, regardless of the outcome.

Again, that famous quote: “For God all things are possible.” Jesus is specifically speaking about eternal life here and the gift that it is. I love this quote, because I think it’s true. I’m also very challenged by this quote. Let me tell you how I think about. This quote does not mean that everything goes our way; it means that there is reason to hope even when we can’t see it or feel it or know it. This certainly mean nothing bad will ever happen. Jesus actually refers to this later in the passage when he talks about how the disciples will receive persecutions in addition to good things. Family and friends still get terribly sick for no good reason whatsoever; crises still happen.

This is the way I like the think about “For God all things are possible.” One of the times we watched this movie as a family a child who shall remain nameless when she was much younger was clamoring in my lap, screaming, “I don’t like this! Turn it off! I’m scared!” And I put my arms around her and said, “I think you need to keep watching the movie until the end. You can close your eyes if you don’t like what’s going on, but I want you to watch the whole thing, because I think everything’s going to be okay, and I want you to see that for yourself and not just have to take my word for it. But I’m going to stay right here with you and we’ll watch it together.”

To me, that’s what this sacred text is. This verse is not God saying that the miraculous physical healing always happens, that if our faith is great enough that we can ward bad things off, No. “For God all things are possible” is Jesus’ embrace of us, a way for Jesus to say, “Yeah, the movie called life might be scary sometimes. But I’m not going to leave you. We’re going to watch it together, because I think you will like the end—the very, very end-- when I make everything right.”

In the movie *Up*, Carl does not get what he wanted or expected out of his little jaunt. He wanted to park his house at the top of Paradise Falls and hang out. Everything starts out pretty well. The house takes off, and things seem to be going just fine. However, they hit lots and lots of bumps, some small, some big. They run into storms, mean dogs, a wacky bird, and a crazed adventurer along the way, all of which throw various kinks into the plan. Carl grows and changes in ways he was not really looking to grow or change. It’s not easy. He also loses a lot along the way, things and people that he loves very dearly. Carl gains new relationships, new ways of looking at things that definitely do not replace what he lost, but signal that there is still more for him here, that his life is not over. He probably would not have made some of these gains if he would have stayed at home and not taken that leap of faith.

So y’all, how do we get better at anything, ever? We practice. Keep taking those leaps of faith. We won’t always get what you want, and that’s fine. If we keep practicing with little hops here and there, when it comes to that big leap of faith, maybe we’ll be ready. Maybe

practice saying, “Hey, wait a minute, that’s not okay” when someone says something that perpetuates the stereotypes that hurts all of us. Perhaps give having a hard conversation a try if something isn’t a friend, a loved one, or a roommate a try. Maybe practice breathing when a chronic condition rears its relentless head. Because God will be with you, no matter what, because for God, nothing is impossible.

Amen.