

I'm a history buff – really our whole family is. So when we travel, going to museums is almost always something we do. We spent a day in Brussels on this last trip and went to a museum there. Part of that museum had displays about the Belgian colonization of Rwanda.

Then we traveled on to Rwanda and learned about that colonization from the Rwandan side. What always strikes me when I read about colonization by the Europeans anywhere in the world is the role of the church.

The role the church has played on the world stage has always been something of a mixed bag. Colonization of developing countries has resulted in some good things.

But in many places, the church backed corrupt empires more than it modeled the kingdom of God. In Rwanda, the path from colonization and the actions of the church led down a convoluted political path ultimately to the horrific genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus in 1994.

We'll delve a little deeper into that later in Lent when we read the passage where Jesus said "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's."

But it's had me wrestling with the role of the church ever since...and particularly this question: What does the world need from the church?

History has shown over and over that the world does not need the church to impose its particular dogmas and structures on other people. Honestly there are people who would just say the church has caused enough harm and should just go away.

But for we Jesus people, that hardly seems faithful. So what does the world need from the church? From us?

What the world needs is for us to respond to Jesus' invitation in the very beginning of his ministry – "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news."

The world needs the church to be a visible manifestation of the Kingdom of God. At the beginning of our trip through Mark, I talked about some of the challenges of using the word Kingdom. I've opted to stick with it.

But I recognize that the temptation is to believe that the kingdom of God should look like a worldly kingdom with all its trappings of wealth and power. We need to pay close attention to how very different the image of God's kingdom is from that.

So far, we've seen that in the Kingdom of God people are healed. People are restored to their communities and relationships are healed. Demons are cast out – and we looked at the modern-day demons that we are called to cast out.

Today's reading deals with the economic picture of the kingdom of God. But this is also a good place to talk about repentance.

The way to the kingdom of God is through repentance – a change in how we view the world and ourselves.

Repentance means to turn back...to change our orientation back to Jesus. And that will include looking at how we treat others.

Since Lent is a season of repentance, with each week's reading we'll look not only at how it reveals the kingdom of God, but also how the passage calls us to repent.

The need to repent always begins with discomfort. There are very few passages in the Bible that cause more discomfort than this one...especially for the economically comfortable.

There are a lot of ways people have tried to wriggle out of the discomfort of this story. But honestly, if we're going to treat the story faithfully, we need to lean into that discomfort.

We need to sit with the uncomfortable questions – am I really supposed to give everything I have to the poor? Am I left out of God's kingdom if I can't? Am I too attached to my own possessions?

To get to those answers, let's start with our main question – how does this passage reveal the Kingdom of God?

There are different layers to the answer. First, there's a socio-economic layer. This man followed the commandments. Presumably his wealth was honorably gained. But even if we assume that, God has always had a concern for care of the poor.

In the world God envisions there would not be the gross imbalance that allows large numbers of people to go hungry while others are very wealthy. That massive inequality is simply incompatible with life in the Kingdom of God.

To create an economic system that models the kingdom of God requires the rich to give up a lot. And that's the needle that needs to be threaded, because it's very hard for those who have wealth.

The next layer has us look at what Jesus is really asking. Jesus is asking this man to give up something to which he is very attached. But it's more than just possessions. This man is grief-stricken because he's being asked to give up what he believes is his identity...who he is is very tied up in his wealth.

The good news of God's kingdom draws us into a world in which our identity depends on God and not on our possessions or some other part of our identity.

And by and large we can't get there on our own. As Jesus said, for mortals it is impossible, but nothing is impossible for God.

For either us as individuals or as a society to truly enact this takes the death of something. It takes God leading us through the death of the person in us who is afraid to give up that much. That's the kind of transformation this man needed. We don't know if he ever got there, but who knows, maybe he did.

So what do we do with this in our lives? If you're uncomfortable with this story, then good. The first step in repentance is a recognition that things are not as they should be.

The next part is always prayer – we pray that God will put to death those attachments that limit our ability to live fully into God's kingdom.

Most of us will likely never get to the point where we sell all our possessions and give it all to the poor. The practicality of that is a little suspect anyway.

But all of us can live into a simple idea: the idea that everything we have really belongs to God. We are simply stewards of it.

And if all of our possessions belong to God, then we can start thinking in practical terms about how to use them. How can we use our possessions to further Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, rather than our own need to have more and more for ourselves.

We can also recognize that our current economy, where a few have massive wealth when others are unable to even get by, calls for a societal repentance.

It calls for a willingness to actually sacrifice for the sake of righting that economy. And it can't be done only through charity. There will need to be political solutions.

You can tell by the pushback that happens with most of those proposals that the reaction of many today is exactly the same as the rich man in this story. That is the eye of the needle.

It seems very daunting, and it is. The camel through the eye of the needle metaphor is very real. But we can all probably find some small place we can start.

In truth, that may be one of the best cases for doing some kind of Lenten fast – giving up something that you really don't want to give up.

Maybe that Lent practice will strengthen our ability to give it up more long term...to make a real sacrifice.

That's ultimately what will be demanded of us if we want to go deeper into our faith and deeper into life in the kingdom.

We will need less of something to make room for the full relationship with Jesus and to live fully into his vision. Whatever that is for you, it all begins with repentance...with a recognition that we need to make some changes.

So, I go back to the original question - what does the world need from the church?

The world needs a church willing to give up our attachment to our possessions – or whatever it is we put our trust in that's not God.

The world needs a church willing to give up some of our own comfort and security for the sake of others.

The world needs a church that will pray that government leaders will put the needs of the poor above their own desire for political success. And that votes that way.

The world needs a church that sends people into the world to work for that kind of justice.

The world needs a church that humbly recognizes what the kingdom of God really looks like...a church that repents of all the ways it has not lived that.

The world needs a church that knows that much of what it clings to needs to die. Only through that death can the church be raised up to be what the world really needs.