

Sermon, October 18, 2015 - Pentecost 21

Mission: Impossible

Mark 10:23–31



Dear friends in Christ!

May God's peace and mercy be with each of you, this day.

There is a saying that goes something like this: "All want to enter Heaven, but not all want to walk there" it certainly the byproduct of a mentality of entitlement and cheap grace at best, and at worst trying to make God understand their particular circumstances. In other words if God is a God of love and compassion He will take me to

heaven not matter what!

Now, that last statement is certainly true, but needs to be understood in the way God has planned it not in our own imagination and desires.

For Jesus says that entering the Kingdom of Heaven and life, is difficult, and even impossible mission. It is not just a mission but a difficult and even impossible. Jesus even describes how truly impossible it is. Jesus says it is like passing a camel through the eye of a needle.

Now, we don't have camels here, but we do have moose and elk, what do you think? Can we pass a moose through the eye of a needle? It depends how big the needle is, right? Think of any needle, there are no needles that will have an eye that will bit a moose or an elk. Yet Jesus says that getting one of those animals through the eye of a needle will be by far easier than entering the Kingdom of Heaven, but why?

Jesus gives a few examples that explain why it is difficult to enter the kingdom of Heaven.

In the previous verses of our Gospel reading, Mark the Evangelist, explains that a rich young man came to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. His questions was appears sincere since he has many things right. The good thing is that he actually comes to Jesus, no other. Actually in the Gospel of Mark, it appears that only sincere individuals, with real needs, ever go to meet Jesus. At that time this young man addresses Jesus as a "Good Teacher." Jesus answer back: "Why do you call me 'good'? Only God is good." As if saying to him, do you understand what you are saying by calling me good? Do you know who I really am? Are you willing to confess who I really am? With not just your lips but with your actions? Are you willing to believe in the impossible? Are you willing to accept just how difficult this mission is?"

The man asks his question: What must he do to inherit eternal life? Jesus points the man to the commandments. The list of commandments Jesus gives isn't exhaustive, nor need it be. It makes the point. The man responds that he has kept these from his youth. Maybe perhaps as the Psalmist writes in Psalm 119:9: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word".

Amazingly, Jesus does not contradict him. He goes into no lecture on the fact that we're all sinners and no one has kept the commandments perfectly. Instead, Jesus "loves" him and tells him that "you lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (v 21). Jesus'

“assignment” forces and challenges the young man to place Jesus and his mission first, thereby testifying to whether the man gets the full implications of calling Jesus “good.” The man leaves saddened because he had many possessions. Did he go away to do what Jesus said? Actually, his sadness merely indicates that he realizes now just how difficult genuine discipleship is. And his downcast face indicates a refusal on his part to follow the path Jesus has laid out. Then late on Jesus turns to his disciples and comments how difficult it is for the rich to enter heaven: “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (v 23). Difficult. Very difficult.

This surprises the disciples. Perhaps they assume that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing and therefore an indicator of one’s relationship with God. Money is a good gift from God, but “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Tim 6:10). How many of us are rich toward God by supporting the preaching of his Gospel? The text as it stands warns us today about the danger of allowing riches to get in the way of our total devotion to God. Riches, rather than always being a sign of God’s favor, can actually get in the way of one’s trust in God. Now it doesn’t have to be riches either but just loving money gets in the way of the Gospel.

But it gets worse—or at least it appears to. Jesus goes on to teach his disciples a deeper truth.

“Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.’ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man it is impossible’” (vv 24b–27a). Humanly speaking, no one can slip a camel, or a moose or an elk, through the eye of a needle. Not only are riches a huge hindrance to entering the kingdom and thus merely difficult, but Jesus also says it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom. And not just the rich! “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answers: it’s impossible for anyone to enter the kingdom of heaven on one’s own.

It’s not just riches that can get in the way of heaven. Indeed, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17). But any of God’s greatest gifts can and often are used by Satan as his greatest temptations and most powerful idols. “Whoever loves father or mother more than me” (Mt 10:37) shows that parents, children, and spouses can become idols. How many people forego church because of their family members? How many leave a church where God’s Word is properly taught to join a church that errs in some doctrine because they want their kids to have a “better” youth group?

No wonder the apostle Paul tells us: “Let us [all of us!] therefore strive to enter that rest” (Heb 4:11) and, as was urged earlier in this same Letter to the Hebrews, to “exhort one another every day . . . that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13)—any sin.

The truth is that no one can save himself. It is impossible. And unlike “difficulties,” there are not grades of “impossibility.” With man, it is simply impossible. With any man, all men, anyone, anywhere. There are no exceptions. No matter what race, no matter how smart, no matter what age, no matter what gender, no matter how rich, no matter how poor. Man cannot and does not do it, not even with a little help from God. It isn’t that man does his part and God does his. Man’s only part in the project is

the impossible. What man brings to the table is the impossible. Man merely brings sin. The only thing men supply is man's need.

No, man needs the God of the possible to do the impossible. "Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at [the disciples] and said, 'With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God'" (vv 26b–27). For us, it's not just difficult; it can't happen. But with God, nothing shall be impossible.

Are you willing to believe in the impossible? The Gospel is the Good News that God does the impossible for you. He paid the price that was impossible for you to pay. He paid for your sin, my sin, the sin of the whole world. No mere mortal could do that. But with God all things are possible. God became man so that you and I might be saved. In Jesus, God died for you. The impossible is possible with God. Indeed, he and he alone opens stony hearts to believe. He truly can make a camel go through the eye of a needle. Whether you are rich or poor, you believe. You are saved. We confess this truth whenever we say with Luther in the Small Catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." Not only your salvation but also your conversion is all God's doing. God doing the impossible.

Even though God has done the impossible and redeemed us, paying for all of our sins, and even though he has done the impossible and turned our hearts of stone into believing hearts, until we enter fully into the kingdom in the resurrection, the road will be hard. Jesus calls us to our own difficult Mission. Jesus, the one who did the truly impossible job of the cross for our salvation, calls upon us to pick up our cross daily and follow him.

Jesus wants to change our thinking, the thinking in this regard—especially in regard to prosperity being the sign that we are among God's blessed people. Quite to the contrary—being a follower of Jesus might entail persecution. And such persecution will seem to the world and even to our own flesh as if God is abandoning us. Contrary to many popular health, wealth, and prosperity preachers, your best life now might entail the cross.

In today's Gospel from Mark, Jesus explains to the disciples that the benefits are huge—"in the age to come," Jesus says, "eternal life." But in the meantime, he says, God's many blessings come "with persecutions" (v 30). The difficulties are also great. Jesus implies that we might lose family members over our faith. As he says elsewhere, "I have come to bring division . . . a son against his father" (cf Lk 12:51, 53). And he specifically warns about persecutions. In this life we will have great blessings, as fellow believers will make up our new family. But we will also have trials and tribulations. And along with these there will be constant temptations, not least of them the desire to look for our security and comfort in wealth.

But remember, no matter how difficult it gets, the Mission, the impossible mission, is accomplished because Jesus has completed his mission for us. We are assured of the victory in Christ because he did the impossible mission.

In His name, amen.