

“An Impossible Task?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 10: 17-31

“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.” This is one of Jesus’ most memorable statements, and on the surface seems kind of strange and humorous. A camel going through the eye of a needle? That certainly is an impossible task, isn’t it?! But it gets your attention, something Jesus is pretty good at doing. It is precisely because that analogy is so ludicrous that his point is so stark: it will be nearly impossible for the rich to enter into his heavenly Father’s kingdom.

This is a story from the Gospel of Mark is about money, about priorities, and about grace. We have probably heard it many times in our life, although each time we read it or hear it, we likely hear something new and different than before. Today, I invite you to consider your wealth, your riches, your life – and to not be afraid to take the first steps for following Jesus Christ, even if it appears to not be easy.

First, let’s consider who this man is that runs up to meet Jesus. The text in Mark does not call the man young, but he is referred to in the other gospels as “the rich young ruler.” He very likely has amassed a considerable amount of money, possessions, and property, for him a sign that God has blessed him abundantly. And the man does not come to Jesus arrogantly or with presumption. He comes asking an honest and genuine question: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus responds to him with the final 6 of the Ten Commandments, those commandments which speak to how we as God’s children are to live in community with one another. I appreciated the following paraphrase of these commandments which one pastor wrote: “Respect and honor your parents. Respect, honor and value another’s life. Be honest and faithful in committed relationships. Don’t take what is yours. If you can’t speak well of your neighbor, don’t speak. Be content and give thanks for what you have” (Carol Hassell, Williams Memorial Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC, October 2012). The young man answers that he has followed all of these since his youth. If he has done all this, what else must he do to inherit eternal life?

Why is that so important to him and to us? Why is it that we and the young man yearn for the finite answer to that infinite question? Are we anxious about what will happen to us after this life is over? Are we fearful that we will not be included in the glory which will come? Do we think there is a certain price we must pay in this life in order to assure that we will be included with all the saints? Why is it so important to the young man, and to us, that we know what must be done to inherit eternal life?

Whatever his motivation, the man is not prepared for Jesus' next statement. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'" (10:21). Jesus doesn't say this to rebuke him, or to embarrass him, or even to correct him. Jesus says this in love and with compassion, as a teacher should. Consequently, he reveals his own knowledge of this man, for it is only afterwards that we are told the young man had many possessions.

Notice what happens to the man after Jesus tells him this: "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving . . ." (10:22). He was stunned that this was the secret to entering God's kingdom. He grieved this sudden loss of understanding which he thought he had. In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, this phrase is translated as "his countenance fell." Another word for countenance is "posture" or "appearance," and I think of it in terms of someone's face suddenly changing from happy or excited to sad and disappointed.

I can see the young man leaving Jesus, stooped over, his face drawn and eyes kind of glazed over. His body tells a lot about his soul, and I imagine we all walk away, too, feeling like we've been hit in the gut with no warning at all. "Sell all our possessions?" the disciples ask. "What are you talking about?" we ask the teacher. "Isn't all that we own and possess a sign of God's blessing on us? Isn't there another way to inherit eternal life?"

Could it be that the man's countenance fell because he was burdened and weighed down by all of his possessions? Could it be that instead of owning his possessions, his possessions owned him? Could this be why Jesus uttered the famous phrase, for in trying to carry all of those belongings on his back, it is truly impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven? (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 28, No. 4, p.13)

David Howell writes: *Taking a step into the future can be a difficult task: getting ready for the first day of school, going out on a first date, leaving the corporate job to set up a business, undergoing experimental treatment for a life-threatening illness . . . The disciples are privy to just how painful steps into the future can be. The kingdom of God is unfolding, but joining Jesus in kingdom activity and behavior is not easy and often it is excruciatingly painful.*

For us, taking a first step is often very difficult and sometimes painful: attending our first AA meeting, calling the marriage counselor, talking with the child about the marijuana in the jeans pocket, coming "out of the closet," or hearing a call to ministry and literally parting with most of what we have to follow Jesus.

[However], life in the kingdom of God does allow for new behavior, new first steps. Life in the kingdom of God is about transformation and character change. And identification with Jesus signifies that character change is not only a slow process but also a relational process. Likewise, nestled and nurtured in the company of believers, people are enabled to take first steps into new behavior. For us, Jesus holds out the hope that, with God, change

and first steps are not only possible but are already happening. So it should not be surprising that, as the result of first steps, “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 166-168).

Our stewardship theme this year is “Changing Lives in Christ.” That theme reflects our belief that what we do in ministry here at John Knox is changing people’s lives by sharing the love of God in Jesus Christ. That theme embodies our vision that we do not come to this place just for ourselves, but primarily for serving and impacting others. That theme recognizes that our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is to trust and take that first step toward the change which is happening around us. To believe that the impossible is most definitely possible with God.

This week, you received materials in the mail detailing our stewardship plans for 2013. You are invited to join us in two weeks for Stewardship Sunday, when we will not only dedicate our gifts for the next year, but also gather for lunch following worship as part of our shepherd groups. It is a wonderful day to both give thanks to God for all we have received, and to give thanks to God for our fellowship and care for one another.

Within that mailing, you received a brochure which illustrates the many different ways the ministry teams and boards of John Knox will seek to change people’s lives in Christ in the coming year. Everything which we do – education, mission, congregational care, worship, maintaining our property and finances – is viewed through the lens of how this activity or program or service will change people’s lives. And I believe that reflects the commission which our Lord gave us: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28).

As you consider all that we have done and seek to do in Christ’s name, how will you seek to change lives through your gifts of time, talent and treasure? How will you respond with your financial pledge for next year – with less, with the same, with more than in the past? How will you respond with your commitment of time and talent – looking at the activities listed on the back of your pledge card, and being willing to change someone’s life with one or two of those activities? Will we see the financial goal set by the Session and its ministry teams as an impossible task, or as a something which, through faith in God, all things are possible?

How will we respond to this most difficult yet awesome command of discipleship? Will we shed our burdens and follow Jesus? Or will we turn away in shock, shoulders slumped and in disbelief? May God be patient with us, show us boundless grace, and walk with us in this journey of faith as we seek to answer Jesus’ invitation for our life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.