

“For God, All Things Are Possible”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 10: 17-31

Nine years ago, I began a sermon on this scripture lesson from Mark in the following way:

These are the phrases of impossibility: “When pigs fly.” “When hell freezes over.” “Over my dead body.” “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 I also said: “When the Chicago Cubs win the World Series.”

Now, they haven’t won the World Series yet. But it is interesting to see how hope does spring eternal, even for Cubs fans after so many years!

These phrases are used when we understand that what is being proposed or suggested is ludicrous or beyond the realm of possibility. In some cases, it is a long-shot because so much time has passed since a team’s last championship or win – right Cubs’ fans? These are the phrases of impossibility.

As Tom mentioned earlier with the children, we’ve brought out our camel from the Advent Visitors to visually remind us of Jesus’ most memorable and famous phrase of impossibility. (By the way – everyone remember the camel’s name? Joe.) I imagine when many of us first heard the one about “the camel and the needle” we thought it was kind of strange and humorous. A camel going through the eye of a needle? That certainly is an impossible thing to do! 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 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. This morning, I invite you to consider your wealth, your riches, your life – and what we can learn from this story about being faithful disciples of Jesus Christ today.

Immediately before this passage in Mark, Jesus welcomes the little children, stating that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (10:15). Then, we read about this man, whom Mark does not call young, but who 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 six of the Ten Commandments, those commandments that speak to how we as God’s children are to live in community with one another. And the young man answers that he has followed all of these since his youth. He has honored his parents; he has not committed murder, adultery, or fraud; he has not born false witness against a neighbor; he has not stolen from someone else. He has tried to live his life according to the Jewish customs and law, as laid out in the Torah. 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 is to 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?

As Charles Campbell notes, “The man’s mind-set, often typical of those who are privileged, is contradictory to Jesus’ teaching. Rather than receiving the kingdom in complete dependence as a little child, the rich man wants to know what he can *do* to inherit eternal life. Indeed, this tension is present even in his question. One can rarely *do* anything for an *inheritance*; by definition, an inheritance is something a person can only be given” (Charles Campbell, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 165).

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 that 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. It happens when a student asks a teacher how he did on a test, and the teacher

tells him he failed. Or it happens when someone goes to buy a home, thinking it's a good deal, only to find out there are numerous repairs that must be made and the price tag soars beyond a limited budget. Our countenance can fall quickly and dramatically.

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).

I don't know about you, but one of the first things I do when I hear a passage like this is to try and rationalize it out of my need to hear it. "The rich doesn't include me. I'm here, trying to meet my monthly bills, clothe and feed my family, provide transportation, health care, and insurance, and on top of all that attempt to save a little here and there. Certainly Jesus isn't speaking to me as one of the rich!" But then I look around my house and see how many clothes we own. I see how many possessions we own. I realize the priority I give to things like a computer, a television, furniture, and so on, and then I know what Jesus was saying. He's not talking to just the wealthy of Indianapolis who live in Fishers, Carmel, or along North Meridian Street. Jesus is talking to anyone whose possessions now own them, and whose countenance falls when we are told to give them up.

Andrew Warner, a pastor in Milwaukee, comments: Jesus' conversation with the rich young man presents two versions of the material life: the first is the young man's life of wealth and status. This is the kind of material life our culture trains us to long for . . . Jesus called the young ruler to a new kind of material life, a life given to serving the poor with the "materials" of tears, blood, and sweat . . . Jesus was not calling the rich young man to an esoteric spiritualism, a Gnostic abandonment of the physical world. Instead, he was calling him to move from one kind of materialism, the self-absorbed variety, to one that focuses on others' needs, including their material needs.

What materialism defines us? I've heard that most of us Americans, at nearly every income level, long for a 20 percent increase in income. "With just 20 percent more, life would be easy," we tell ourselves. But for most of us this is an unquenchable hunger . . . The kind of materialism Jesus calls us to requires not the accumulation of

goods, but an engagement with people, particularly people in need. Perhaps the first lesson for [all of] us “rich young men” is to realize the empty promise of our consumption. The second is to follow Jesus in the abundant life of engagement (“Material Things,” Christian Century, October 3, 2006, 19).

Jesus invites us and the young man to shed the burden of our possessions and to follow him. You’ll notice that is Jesus’ way of describing eternal life: following him. If we can turn our lives from following what possesses us, and allow God to possess us, then we have begun to take those first steps of discipleship and toward eternal life. Whether it’s as individual Christians, or as the Body of Christ called the Church, that is the challenge that Jesus sets before us. But what if we viewed our possessions as the means to serve in discipleship? What if our money and treasure was not a burden, but the blessings that we use to give back to God all God has given to us? Perhaps if our perspective would shift in this way, then our countenance wouldn’t fall but would rise as we rise to follow our Lord.

In a couple of weeks, you will receive your stewardship materials for next year at John Knox. This information will tell the story of God’s grace in our past, the transformation of people’s lives in the present, and also the challenges we face as a congregation for the future. On November 15, we will dedicate our pledges of financial support for Christ’s ministry in this place. As you and your family consider your giving for next year, I challenge you to consider your giving not as what weighs us down, but allows us to rise up and follow our Lord.

How will we respond to this most difficult yet awesome command of discipleship? Will we shed our burdens and follow him? 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 that with God, all things are indeed possible. Amen.