

Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost
October 21, 2018
Mark 10:23-31
“Mission Impossible”

Many of you will recall the old TV program “Mission Impossible.” Others in our midst have been introduced to the general idea through the more recent movies starring Tom Cruise. In essence, the television program revolved around an agent, originally by the name of Dan Briggs and then later Jim Phelps, receiving dangerous government assignments. The tagline came from the tape recording which introduced the mission at the beginning of each episode. “Your mission, Mr. Briggs, should you decide to accept it, is...” And then after describing the mission, the tape would self-destruct in five seconds. The name of the show came, I suppose, because each of the missions appeared to be impossible. At the end of every show however Agent Briggs or Phelps and his team had triumphed spectacularly, they had done the impossible. I suppose the titles: “Mission Very Difficult” just doesn’t have the same appeal.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus talks about entering the Kingdom of God and living in that kingdom. In one case He describes it as very difficult, like the “Mission Impossible” episodes – not truly impossible but really, really difficult. In another case, He describes it as truly impossible. So which one is it? Is the mission of entering into the Kingdom of God just really hard or is it actually impossible?

Remember the lesson from last Sunday and the interchange that occurs just before the words of our text today? A man comes to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus truly loves this man and this man certainly seems sincere in his desire to know how to gain eternal life. He has many, many things right. He has come to the right person, Jesus. In fact, he runs to Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark it is only the sincere, those who have genuine needs, that ever run to meet Jesus. And unlike the scribes and Pharisees, this man kneels before Jesus. He addresses Jesus in a respectful way, “Good Teacher.” It’s so complementary in fact that Jesus uses it to encourage the young man to consider the full implications of what he has just said: “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.” With this reminder from the First Table of the Law, involving God and His name, Jesus doesn’t seem to be criticizing the young man, but inviting him to contemplate the fact that he just confessed that Jesus is God. It’s as if Jesus as the master teacher is prodding the young man, “You call me good. Yet you know that only God is good. Are you saying that I am God? Are you willing to believe in the impossible, that God has become a man? How far are you willing to take this? Could you do what you need to do?”

The man asks his question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Psalm 119 asks an important question: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to Your Word” (Psalm 119:9). So, where does Jesus point this man? To the commandments. To God’s Word. The list of commandments that Jesus gives, nor does it need to be. It makes His point. The man responds by affirming that he has kept all of the commandments since his youth. Amazingly, Jesus does not contradict his claim. He doesn’t launch into a lecture on the fact that we are all conceived and born in sin and fall short of the glory of God. Rather Jesus

simply loves the man and tells him “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” (Mark 10:21). Jesus’ assignment forces the young man to acknowledge whether or not he can say with the psalmist, “In the way of Your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches” (Psalm 119:14). It also challenges him to place Jesus and His mission first, thereby testifying to whether the man gets the full implications of what it means to call Him good. The man however leaves saddened because he had many possessions. Did he go away to do what Jesus commanded, his sadness merely indicating that he realizes now just how difficult genuine discipleship is? Or does his downcast demeanor indicate a refusal on his part to pursue the path Jesus has set before him? Whatever the case Jesus turns to His disciples and comments how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Difficult. Very difficult.

This surprises the disciples. Perhaps it is because they assumed that wealth is a sign of God’s blessing and therefore an indicator of one’s relationship with God. Money is a good gift of God, but “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Timothy 6:10). How many of us are rich toward God by supporting the preaching of the 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 Jesus. Riches, rather than always being a sign of God’s pleasure, can actually be a hindrance to trusting the Lord.

But it gets even worse or at least it appears so. Jesus goes on to teaching 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” (Mark 10:24b-27a). No one can slip a camel through the eye of a needle. Not only are riches a huge hindrance to entering the kingdom thus making it really hard, but Jesus says it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom. And it’s not just the rich. Let Jesus’ words stand. “With man it is impossible.” It is impossible for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God.

It’s not just riches that can get in the way either. Indeed as James says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17). But any of God’s good gifts can and often are used by the father of lies, Satan, to tempt God’s people into idolatry. You remember what Jesus says, “Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37). These words show that parents, children, spouses and other family members can become false gods. How many people forego Church because of family members? How many leave a congregation where God’s Word is properly taught in order to join a church that errs in doctrine because they want their kids to have a “better” youth group?

The Gospel account of the young man serves as narrative example of the warning to all believers contained within our Epistle: “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest” (Hebrews

4:11) and as is urged earlier in that same letter “exhort one another every day...that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrew 3:13).

The simple truth is that no one can save himself. It is impossible. And unlike “difficulties” there are no grades of impossibility. With man it is simply not doable. With any person, every person, anywhere, any time. There are zero exceptions. No matter what race, no matter how smart, no matter what age, no matter what sex, no matter how rich, no matter how poor, man cannot and does not do it, not even with help from God. It isn’t that man does his part and God does His. Man’s part in the equation is impossible. What man brings to the table is nothing. Man merely brings sin. The only thing men supply is need.

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” (Mark 10:26b-27). For us, it’s not a matter of things just being difficult. For us, it cannot be done. But with God, all things are possible.

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 you sin, my sin, the sin of the whole world. No mere man could do that. But with God all things are possible. God became a man so that you and I might be saved. In Jesus, God died for your salvation. The impossible was made possible by God’s actions. Indeed He and He alone is the one who opens stony hearts to believe. He and He alone 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 does the impossible.

Even though God has done the impossible and has 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 of God the road will be difficult. Jesus calls us to our own Mission Very Difficult. Jesus, the one who did the truly impossible job of sacrificing Himself on the cross to pay for the sins of the world and then rising to life again, calls upon us to pick up our cross and follow Him.

Jesus wants to alter the simplistic thinking of His disciples 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 sinful flesh as if God is abandoning us. Contrary to popular belief your best life now might very well entail enduring the cross.

In today's text, Jesus explains to the disciples that the benefits are incredible – “in the age to come, eternal life” says our Lord. But in the meantime also He says, God's many blessings come “with persecutions” (Mark 10:30). The difficulties are great. Jesus implies that we might very well lose family members over our faith in Jesus. As Jesus says elsewhere, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Luke 12:51-53). More specifically He warns about persecution. In this life we will have great blessings as our fellow believers become our new family. But we will also face 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 and possessions.

But remember, no matter how difficult it gets, the Mission Impossible is now Mission Accomplished because Jesus completed the mission fully when He suffered, died, and rose again for us. We are assured of the victory in Jesus because He did the Mission Impossible. And this promise of God will not self-destruct in five seconds, or five years, or five millennia. No it is eternal, it lasts forever. Because Jesus did the impossible you are forgiven for all of your sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.