

Ascension Lutheran Church

Pastor Godkin's Sermon for the week of October 18, 2009

With God Nothing is Impossible (Matthew 10:23-31)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. The text for today's homily is from the tenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark. Our Lord says to us:

"Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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." ²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

This is the Word of God.

Friends in Christ, the great writer Mark Twain once said, "Everything has its limit - iron ore cannot be educated into gold". Our world is defined by limits. We measure almost everything we see; our height, our weight, we count money, we count our age, the amount of gas we put in our cars, the size of our home, the size of our families, the size of our pants, and so on... Our planet itself, as enormous as it is, is also limited in its size.

Some limits are good. What if there was no speed limit? What if there were no laws? Life here would be chaos. In this way limits are good. They serve a good purpose. And God has given us the Ten Commandments, His Law to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. He has given His Law because firstly, it gives glory to God, and secondly, it is good for us and for the world as a whole. God's laws act as boundaries that keep us safe. Going beyond those boundaries leads into danger because it leads us away from God's holy order for His creation.

For example, God's first commandment says, "You shall have no other gods before me". That means we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. But if we love something more than God then we are in trouble. For God alone deserves our highest praise and affection and obedience. He is our Maker and our Redeemer. He is the Lord of all things. The first commandment is the key to the rest of the commandments.

By all outward appearances the rich man in our text seemed to have his life very together. He would have been a good example for the rest of the people. Luke's Gospel indicates that he was a ruler, perhaps a statesman or city councillor of some kind. On the surface to most people he probably seemed to be a good living young man who was blessed with an abundance of wealth. And in Old Testament times people considered wealth as a sign of God's approval and blessing, provided that the wealth was not attained through dishonest ways.

But when Jesus told the man that he still lacked one thing to gain eternal life and instructed the man to sell all his possessions the man went away very sad and he did not follow Jesus. We are not told what happened to this rich young man afterward though from this passage we have insight into his thoughts and desires and motives. Jesus cut to the heart of the man's problem; he loved his possessions more than he loved God. In order to follow Jesus the man would need to give up his idol of money. But sadly, the man could not bring himself to take that step. It seemed impossible to him.

This is where Jesus turns to His disciples and says something we are to take quite literally: "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." Now when we think of a camel, a large animal attempting to go through the eye of a needle, a tiny opening, the only conclusion we can reach is that this is a ridiculous proposition. It is simply impossible! Note the disciples' reaction; "They were exceedingly astonished and said to Him, 'Then who can be saved?'" In their minds if even a good living, respected man of the community who seemingly had the sign of God's approval with great wealth, if even he could not be saved then who could be saved?

As Clint Eastwood said in his famous role as tough guy cop Dirty Harry, "A man's got to know his limitations..." Man has limits but God does not. What is impossible with man is possible with God. As Jesus answered His disciples, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

A man's got to know his limitations, most definitely. God commands us to do good works, this is true. He commands that we love our neighbour, that we serve each other with no thought of reward. But He tells us also that doing good works will not save us and that we can never be good enough to enter the Kingdom of God.

Many people have a false idea of Judgement Day that God's standard is not like some sort of scale that if we simply do more good things than bad things than we can tip the balance in our favour and enter the Kingdom. But God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. His standard is perfection, perfect holiness; perfect obedience. Anything short of that disqualifies us from life in His kingdom, that is, if we try to make it on our own steam.

Now this is shocking to our culture. It is shocking to hear that no matter how hard we try, in the last analysis even our best works are tainted with some sort of sin.

Let's take St. Paul for example. If ever there was an exemplary saint it was him. Let's look at his credentials: he was an apostle, a chosen instrument of God who authored 1/3 of the New Testament. He was a zealous preacher of the Gospel even in the face of intense persecution. Lastly, as a result of his faithful preaching he died a Christian martyr.

And yet St. Paul confessed his struggle with sin in his letter to the Roman church. Even he found no room to boast or expect any extra favour from God. He saw things from God's perspective. Conscious of his shortcomings, he called himself 'chief of sinners'.

He said, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." He goes on, "When I want to do good evil is right there with me". Then Paul gets rather harsh with himself here. He says, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And I am sure that Paul's struggle is much like ours. Then, Paul answers his own question with the sweet good news of grace. He says, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Friends, Jesus does the impossible! He has come and lived the perfect life of obedience we could not. He can put a camel through the eye of a needle. And He is our Saviour. When He died on the cross He paid for our thousands of sins, for every impure thought, word and deed. He took it all on Himself. He did the impossible when He rose from the dead. He went beyond the limits of our fallen humanity and did what only God can do. He did what only His love could ever accomplish. In Baptism He forgave our sins and made us His dear children and heirs of the Kingdom. In Holy Communion Jesus continues to do the impossible, as He gives His body and blood and sustains our faith and life in Him.

Friends, the fact that we have limits is surely good news for us. A man's got to know his limitations so he can know the limitless power of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. For His blood is the very power of life over death.

Some people ask, "Can God create a rock that He cannot lift?" This can be a mindbender but it really is not a hard question. Since God is infinite and has no limits there is nothing He cannot do. However, He can create a rock that is too big for us to lift. And in these circumstances, when things are out of our control in our life He draws us back to Him, to His strength and His limitless power. He can do all things and He gives strength to get us through any and all things. As Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."

The limitless nature of God is what comforts us as we share the Gospel and share in His work. We are not alone. He is with us as Jesus said, "I am with you always to the very end of the age." We can depend on Him to guide and give us the words to speak. And as the hymn says, "Jesus, I trust Thy faithfulness. If nothing is too hard for Thee, All things are possible to me." Amen. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.