

Mathew 19-20

**Mission Impossible
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Tim Dickau

I can't live if living is like this

Have you ever encountered the sort of problem, limit or struggle where you think to yourself: I just can't live if living is like this. Unless this situation changes, disappears or is fixed, I can't do this anymore. Where all you can think about is that particular problem? Where life seems impossible without getting rid of this problem.? I certainly have.

In our reading of Mathew's gospel this Fall, we have come to a point where Jesus' movement is gaining strength. He has continued to both attract the crowds and thus has become a greater threat to those with influence and power, like the Pharisees. Chapter 19 begins with them throwing a question out to "test" Jesus and attempt to undermine his authority. It's a question about divorce. Jesus' response launches a series of passages in chapters 19 and 20 where Jesus teaches about situations which the disciples regard as impossible, the sort of situations we might find "impossible" ourselves. (slide) In the first passage, Jesus teaches about marriage, saying that divorce isn't meant to be as easy as some have made it out to be. Which makes the disciples wonder if marriage should be avoided, altogether, knowing that marriage sometimes seems impossible to carry on at times.

In the second passage, the passage we heard, Jesus encounters a rich man who wants to know how he can become part of God's renewed world, the age to come, and after some interesting back and forth about keeping the commandments which we will look at in more detail, Jesus tells him to go and give away everything he has. Which the man won't do. His refusal then prompts Jesus to say how difficult it is for people with riches to get into the kingdom Jesus' response blows the minds of Jesus' apprentices since it was assumed that if anyone is going to be part of God's restored world it is the rich. The rich have the money and the time to keep the commands, they are the blessed of God. If they can't get in, who can? Impossible.

In the next passage, a parable about workers who encounter a gracious landlord who pays the workers who work a full day their full pay but who also pays workers who come at the end of the day a full wage. Those who work a full day can't stand the fact that others who don't work a full day make the same amount they do. It's not fair. The unfairness seems intolerable.

All of these passages present situations where Jesus' teaching seems nearly impossible to carry out. Which is why I titled the sermon "Mission impossible". While most of you groaned, I was pretty happy with myself when I came up with that title. My hope is that for just one or two of you who like puns as I do, you have found a little happiness today in this title too!

More than Tom Cruise can Handle

What do we do when we are confronted with "mission impossible"? I mean a real mission impossible. Tom Cruise can overcome villains, bullets and rockets with all the right moves and heroic acts but you don't see him hanging in there in a tough marriage or giving away his wealth -- in the movies or in real life. What Jesus is talking about are life's "impossible missions". And dodging bullets and chasing bad guys down isn't going to solve these problems.

(slide) I wonder if you are facing a "mission impossible" right now. Or what would you identify as the "missions impossible" that we are facing as a society? I want to give you a moment to identify what may be a mission impossible that you face personally and that we face corporately as a society. I'm going to give you a moment to write these down on your sheet now. I invite you to hold both of these responses today and to listen to what Jesus might be doing in our impossible missions. I'll give you some time near the end to write that down too but you might want to jot notes as you listen.

Jesus' Teaching on Marriage

To help us listen for Jesus' response to our impossible missions, let's look at these three passages: first Jesus' teaching on marriage at the beginning of chapter 19. The Pharisees pose this question designed to get Jesus broiled in controversy about whether it's okay for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason. John the Baptist recently got his head cut off for opposing king Herod's divorce and remarriage to Herodias so this was no mere theoretical question. For a public leader like Jesus, his answer had political and perhaps dire consequences. Now, the way the question is asked – can a man divorce his wife -- reflects not only the patriarchal culture of the day but a distorted understanding of marriage according to Jesus. In response to that question, Jesus points them back to the creation story, a story affirming that marriage was meant to unite two people for life. Because the Mosaic Law in the Old Testament permitted divorce, it seems that some people, including the Pharisees, thought that God was just fine with divorce. Not so, says Jesus, the legislation in the Mosaic law allowing divorce was due to the people's hard hearts

To get at what's going on here, think of driving a car. Sometimes you get into an accident and you will need some help to know what to do – get the license plate of the other driver, exchange phone numbers, make an appointment with ICBC – I do seem to have a little experience in this area as our van bears witness too – but the point of driving is not to have an accident. Likewise, the goal of covenanting with another person is not to know how to break up easily but to learn how to love another person for the long haul and to form a little team taking up God's mission together.

Jesus affirms the marriage covenant's long-term vision and goes a step further, however. He suggests that God is now doing a work of changing people's hearts so that they can live more fully into this vision of covenant. This power to soften hearts is part of Jesus' oft repeated claim that he is dealing with the root problem of human hard hearts through his life and the recently unveiled secret of his anticipated death.

The disciples don't really grasp this point and ask Jesus that if God's intention to divorce, is it better to not marry at all? They seem to know that marriage has impossible moments where you can hardly imagine finding a way together.

In his response, you'd expect a first century Jewish leader to say that marriage is the big deal in life, since continuing the Jewish family was one of the main goals of life. But Jesus opens up new territory by affirming that some may stay single, either by realities beyond their control or by choice. According to Jesus, being single was also a valid a good way to take up the way of the kingdom in ways that those married could not. This was a way Jesus himself took. In this teaching then, Jesus upholds life-long covenanted relationships and the single life as good ways of seeking God's kingdom.

What do we do with this teaching today? Look, marriage can be impossible at times, no matter who you are married to and how great they are. Perhaps you are in a marriage that seems impossible right now. If so, let someone know, let us know so that we can support you in that place. We know that some marriages don't make it. Jesus himself gives one example where marriage might end, where there is marital unfaithfulness. If your marriage has ended, know that God's grace is greater than our sin and brokenness. There is a way back to wholeness.

I've seen that happen. One of my good friends who left his marriage during a very dark period turned back to Jesus some years later and allowed God to soften his heart. He never recovered his marriage but he did recover his friendship with his wife and is making a difference for the kingdom.

If you are in a relationship or marriage that seems impossible right now, the question to ask yourself is this: Is my heart soft? Or has it become hard? A soft heart is no guarantee that marriage will survive. A soft heart however is key not only to finding your way through an impossible marriage, it is key to living well as a married or single person. The reason: a soft heart opens us up to being transformed by the healing power of God.

The Rich Young Man

Story # 2, the story we heard a moment ago. In this story, a man comes to Jesus and asks him “what must I do to inherit eternal life? This question is not about how he could go to heaven. Eternal life was code language for the age to come, as was the phrase the kingdom of heaven. It was a way of talking about God’s restored rule upon the earth. So the question was more like “when God acts to save our people and becomes king, who will get in on it? Who will be vindicated and validated as God’s faithful?”

Jesus’ initial answer reflected a typical response of a rabbi. Keep the commandments. When the young man asks which ones, Jesus names the last 6 of the ten commands.

The man has those under his belt and asks what else he must do.

Jesus then offers a way for the man to fulfil the first three of the ten commandments about loving the Lord your God. “If you want to be perfect or complete, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Now, on the one hand, Jesus didn’t give this command to everyone, just as he didn’t give the command to be celibate to everyone. When he did, it was either because he sensed that money was this young man’s idol or because he needed some people free from the requirements of marriage to share in his itinerant work. On the other hand, Jesus did often warn people about the dangers of wealth and how the idolatry of wealth was leading people down a destructive path. And he certainly offers this stark warning here: “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, 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 shocks the disciples. They *assumed* that the rich were going to be part of the kingdom; the question for them was, who else? Take a moment to write these down on your sheet now. But Jesus was saying that the rich were not automatically within the covenant. When the kingdom finally arrived, how rich you were would have little to do with whether you were included as part of it. God was turning things upside down.

Which prompts them to ask “Who then can be saved?” It all seemed impossible to the disciples. Jesus assured them that it was impossible from their perspective, but that with God, all things *are possible*.

Like much of Jesus’ teaching, this story has a typical urgency to what Jesus was doing. He was bringing the entire story and mission of Israel to its fulfilling climactic moment. What’s more he was forming a new kind of community to carry out God’s restored mission where “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much”. In this urgent mission, neither mucking around with your covenanted relationships, nor holding on to your riches when they were needed for this project was going to cut it. What mattered, what was needed, was putting Jesus and loyalty to his agenda at the top of your priority list.

What do we do with this challenging passage? Look, not everyone can easily give away all their money. We live in a crazy expensive city. We have responsibilities.. But the question is are you willing to dispossess yourself of something for the sake of others, for the sake of the kingdom of God? Contrary to our notions of private property where “what’s mine is mine”,

The Bible reminds us that “The earth is the Lord’s”. Everything belongs to God. All is ultimately a divine gift.

This call to share our money and possessions more deeply is a way of life that we like other communities across North America keep taking small steps towards. Slowly, we are learning to share not only our money, but also our homes, our cars, our tools, and our lives. This deeper shared way of life involves both giving up our possessions AND discovering the riches of belonging to a community that has more together.

Some communities have gotten further than us in this journey and from whom we have much to learn. Joy and Jake and Rebecca and Kathi recently returned from a gathering of some of those communities like the communities of Reba Community where Sally Youngquist and David Jansen are a part of who visited us or Englewood church which Chris Smith is a part of. They are learning to share even more deeply of their possession. Jesus wasn’t asking the rich man to live in isolated poverty; he was asking him to trust in communal riches! How do we keep pursuing that vision, not only as a church, but as a city where economic equality is disappearing fast? If we can move in this direction, we will have something important to offer our city.

When Life isn’t Fair

Of course, it’s hard to share if you don’t feel like you are getting a fair shake in life. What do you do with the impossible situation of unfairness? This question underlies the parable in the beginning of chapter 20. The parable is about workers who come to get their pay, which was a fair amount that they had agreed to, discover that those who started work later in the day, even those who came right near the end of the day, earned as much as they did.

That’s not fair. They started grumbling. We’ve put up with this heat and strain and now you are paying them the wage we are getting.

Jesus answers: I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

Therein lies the point of this story. Among his people, and among his own followers, were those who had put in the blood sweat and tears to be faithful, to keep the commands. But now the crowds seemed to be flocking in at this late date and Jesus was extending the same generous welcome and opportunity to be part of this, which struck the faithful all the wrong way. Shouldn’t we at least be getting a little more for all the heat and strain we’ve endured?

Jesus challenges this framework. The point of the story is not actually the “wage” at all. God doesn’t make contracts with us, as if we could negotiate a better deal. God makes covenants with us in which God promises us everything and asks of us everything in return. God keeps promises out of the overflow of divine generosity.

Are you getting stuck in the framework of continually asking “is it fair?” The better question, the more life giving question for us is this: how am I on the receiving end of the generosity of God? How might I share that generosity with others?

Mission Impossible Made Possible by Jesus

Three stories about impossible missions. The common thread in these stories it seems to me is not about some way that we can heroically overcome these impossible situations. The common thread is what God is doing through Jesus to make the impossible possible. Jesus is dealing with the powers that make our hearts hard, liberating us from them. Jesus is forming a community that refuses to privilege personal wealth but that can make us communally rich,

if we love one another in tangible ways. Jesus doesn't guarantee you will get "more" based on your hard work, that life will always be "fair" in terms defined by ours or most cultures: he does however guarantee that he will extend his generosity to you and others. This is the basis upon which life becomes bigger than just getting our due.

All these situations that seemed impossible to the disciples and may seem impossible to you are the very situations where God comes. "With humans this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

What is the mission impossible that you are holding, personally and for us corporately? How might God be at work to make the impossible possible in your life? In our city?

I want to give you a moment of silence to reflect and write on your paper how you think God might be doing in your impossible mission.

St. Patrick

When I get stuck in these impossible missions, one thing that is helpful for me is to hear or read history, especially to read about the lives of people who have not been so shaped by the consumer culture we are all a part of. This summer, I read two books about St. Patrick while I was in Ireland. This dude did not have a "fair" life by any means.

At the age of 16, he was captured and sold as a slave owner beside Dublin by Irish raiders. But he didn't fixate on how "unfair it was". He writes this in his confessions. "I was then about sixteen years of age. I did not know the true god. I was taken into captivity to Ireland with many thousands of people and deservedly so, because we turned away from God and did not keep God's commands."

When we was forced to work in isolation in the hills for months at a time, he did not become bitter. Instead of growing a hard heart, his heart began to soften. "After I came to Ireland, I watched over sheep. Day by day I began to pray more frequently – and more and more my love of God and my faith in God and reverence for God began to increase." Patrick also began to see creation as God's gracious gift.

When he escaped six years later, he went back to Europe where he studied theology and then returned to Ireland as a missionary. Patrick succeeded in his mission by touching the people through a deep respect and love for them and a culture he had come to embrace. In his book, *How the Irish saved Civilization*, Thomas Cahill writes these words: "In becoming an Irishman, Patrick wedded his world to theirs, his faith to their life... Patrick found a way of swimming down to the depths of the Irish psyche and warming and transforming Irish imagination - making it more humane and more noble while keeping it Irish. No longer would baptismal water be the only effective sign of a new life in God. New life was everywhere in rank abundance, and all of God's creation was good,"

As his popularity grew, Patrick was offered money both for himself and his missions. But his refusal to accept gifts from kings placed him outside the normal ties of kinship, fosterage and affinity. Legally he was without protection, and he says that he was on one occasion beaten, robbed of all he had, and put in chains, perhaps awaiting execution.

By the end of his life, Ireland was a different place. His mission had led to the conversion of "thousands". Monasteries began to spring up all over Ireland, small communities that not only disciplined and nurtured community life but that preserved many of the ancient texts that were being destroyed during the collapse of the Roman empire, and which we would not have today were it not for Irish monks.

Patrick was a man for whom life was not fair, who gave away most of what he had, a man whose heart instead of becoming hard became soft to the love of Christ.

The prayer attributed to Patrick and which we use in many of our liturgies, points to the singular focus upon the powerful work of Christ who both in and through Patrick's life made this impossible mission into mission possible.

I want to invite us to pray this prayer together today in its shortened version, holding the impossible missions we face before Christ together today

I arise today through

**God's strength to pilot me, God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me, God's eye to see before me,
God's ear to hear me, God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me, God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me, God's host to secure me –
against snares of devils,
against temptations and vices,
against inclinations of nature,
against everyone who shall wish me
ill, afar and anear,
alone and in a crowd...**

**Christ, be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit,
Christ where I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.
Salvation is of the Lord.
Salvation is of the Lord.
Salvation is of the Christ.
May your salvation, O Lord, be ever with us.**

Amen.