

“God’s Possibilities”
Mark 10:17-31

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¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, 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.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.” ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Jesus says, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” And when the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Can you imagine Jesus telling you to sell everything you have and give the money to the poor? Can you imagine that conversation? You’re talking with Jesus and he’s telling you what a good person you’ve been lately, and just when you’re thinking, “Well, what a pleasant little chat with Jesus this is,” he says, “Oh, and one more thing—I almost forgot. When you get home, if you could just sell everything and give it all away, that’d be great.” Can you imagine that conversation?

Sell everything. If Jesus were walking around today handing out that kind of advice, we might wonder how folks would react. “I’m sorry, Jesus—I heard everything you were saying, but then it *sounded* like you said I should sell all my stuff. Surely you didn’t mean *everything*...”

I’m sort of a garage sale junkie. Driving around on Fridays and Saturdays, I often can’t resist the magnetic pull of the “Rummage Sale” signs. I like the prospect of a good deal, but beyond that, I’m often fascinated to see what people own in the first place. When I go to a yard sale and see

someone selling, say, thirty coffee mugs, I wonder to myself, “What’s going on in this guy’s life that he’s let himself accumulate thirty coffee mugs to begin with?” So, of course, I’m particularly enchanted with estate sales. In part, again, I know I might pick up a tool or some other little item that I think I need. But I’m also fascinated to wonder about the fact that this is *everything*, or almost everything, in a person’s life—and that at the end of my own life, this may be what happens with a good lot of the stuff I own, too. Someone will pick up *my* salad spinner and wonder if it’s worth fifty cents. Somewhere, somehow, a total stranger will contemplate the twenty-five cent purchase of my copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* as either a wise or unwise investment.

And I’m fine with that. After all, by the time someone else is conducting my own estate sale, I’ll have no use for books and salad spinners. But if you asked me to sell it all today, right now—well, that’s another story.

When I read this story in Mark’s gospel, I imagine the man contemplating his own estate sale, and he can’t stomach the thought. He can’t give it all up—not right at this moment, and maybe not ever. And then this man does something that no other person in the gospels ever does: he declines Jesus’ invitation to be a disciple.

Don’t know if you caught that, but that’s what Jesus is offering here. In their conversation, Jesus issues an invitation for this guy to be the thirteenth disciple. He says, “Come, follow me”—same thing he said to Peter, James, and John. Drop your nets, drop your stuff, don’t think about it—just come, follow me. And they did. But this one, well, he’s having some trouble. And so he does what no one else does in Scripture: he says, “No” to Jesus and walks away.

William Willimon is a bishop in the Methodist Church, and he writes that this gospel story “reminds us that there are good, understandable, reasonable reasons for not following Jesus.” “Jesus,” Willimon writes, “is too often presented by us... as the solution to all our problems, the way to fix everything that’s wrong in our lives. But this story reminds us that Jesus is sometimes the beginning of problems we would never have had if we had not been met by Jesus!”

Jesus might just be the beginning of your problems. That’d make a nice T-shirt for First Presbyterian Church, wouldn’t it? “Jesus: the beginning of all your problems.” At least there’d be some truth in advertising. You think you’ve got problems now? Just wait ‘til you start following Jesus. Just wait ‘til you start really trying to love your enemies. Just wait ‘til you start turning the other cheek and blessing those who curse you and loving *all* your neighbors as you love yourself. *Then* come tell me about your problems.

So here’s a thought: maybe the other twelve disciples really had no idea what on God’s green earth they were getting themselves into when they started following Jesus. But this man—the man who said “no” to Jesus—he knew. He knew better than to get himself over his head with Jesus. He knew better than to commit himself to something that was beyond his ability to accept. And so he went home, grieving, back to his stuff. And then I wonder if he just sat there, looking at it all—feeling trapped, isolated, and surrounded by things. He had found Jesus compelling, but not compelling enough.

It's strange. I usually think that if I met Jesus face to face, my faith in him would increase. I often neglect the notion that Jesus might force me to examine my own life in such a way that I, too, would walk away, grief-stricken—unable to really follow.

The rich man walks away from Jesus, who then says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. In other words, it's impossible—can't be done. The disciples are shocked and confused. "Then who can be saved?" they ask. And then Jesus says something that may have been of some comfort to the rich man, had he heard it: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

"Just so we're clear," Jesus says, "it's impossible for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. But for God, all things are possible."

Sort of a strange thing to say—and a strange way to say it. It's impossible, but for God, all things are possible.

I'm challenged by this story on so many levels. First and obviously, we live on a planet where the richest 2% of the people possess over half the world's wealth, while the poorer half owns less than 1% of it. In those terms, we have something in common with the rich young man.

I am also challenged to think that for God all things are possible. "For God all things are possible" means that *nothing* is impossible! And if *nothing is impossible*, then I'm out of excuses, aren't I?

"For God all things are possible" means that the stumbling blocks in the way of what God wants me to do in my life are of my own creation.

"For God all things are possible" means that the barriers and roadblocks in the way of me serving God as I am called to serve are but figments of my own unimagination.

You see, if we believe that for God all things are possible, then by association, we have to believe that, indeed, *all things are possible*.

Now in some churches, when the pastor says something really important, he or she tells the congregation to turn to each other and say that thing. So let's try it. Turn to your neighbor right now and say it: "With God all things are possible." Go ahead.

It feels kind of funny, doesn't it? But you said it! And it's true! *With God all things are possible*.

Restoring a crippled relationship. It's possible.
Radically changing your career. It's possible.
Healing the wounds of your past. It's possible.
Overcoming addiction. It's possible.

Saying “yes” to God’s direction in your life. It’s possible.
Thriving in a church family and bringing light and love to the city of Racine. It’s possible.

Sometimes I wonder if God doesn’t have a whole host of possibilities, just waiting in the wings for us to believe that, yes—with God all things are possible. With that in mind, I’d like to invite us to think of First Presbyterian Church as “The Church of God’s Possibilities,” because, in fact, that’s what we are.

We are *not* “The Church of People Trying Really Hard to Implement Good Ideas.”
We are *not* “The Church of People with Good Intentions but Realistic Expectations.”

We are The Church of God’s Possibilities, and once we accept this, there is no limit to what God will be able to do with us and through us. I’ve been here for a year and a week now, and I believe that. And it thrills me to death to know that many of you believe it too. The Church of God’s Possibilities. That’s what we are. Amen.