

“All Things Are Possible for God”

Hebrews 4: 12-16, Mark 10: 17-31

The Dr. Rev. Andrew McDonald

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

October 14, 2018

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

This is a hard passage to hear. Don't you find yourself quietly thinking, "Please, Jesus, say something to make this passage less upsetting!" And there have been people trying to help with that. Over the history of its interpretation, there has been a long string of... rationalizations.

The rationalization that was popular when I grew up on was this: The "Needle's eye" is really referring to a small gate in Jerusalem. In this small gate, you might need to push and pull, you might need to downsize your camel, perhaps go from the moral equivalent of an SUV camel down to a mini-Cooper camel. But Jesus will help you push it on through. The point being, it is doable. Reasonable. It can happen! Nice. That makes Jesus reasonable.

There are a couple of problems with that interpretation. The first problem is, that Needle's eye gate really did exist, but it was not built or named until 900 years after Jesus made this statement. So that gate cannot be what Jesus was talking about.

The second problem is the more profound problem: namely, Jesus does not want to be tamed. We do not do Jesus any favors trying to domesticate the gospel.

But if we take the Bible seriously, and look at the text, we see that Jesus does not tell everyone to sell everything: this is more of a case of individual surgery, not a mass surgery. We will come back to the rich young man in a few minutes.

The Bible says, "With God, all things are possible." The definition of the word, "Possible" has two associated meanings: power and potential.

In other words, Jesus does not say, With God all things are "a given." I knew a pastor who bought a new Porsche. His friends said, "How are you going to pay for it?" He said God would take care of it. I think he needed to learn, it not a matter of faith, it's a matter of interest rates.

I knew women who had not checked her oil in 3 years: she said she prayed about it, and God would take care of it. I tried to tell her, it's not a matter of faith: it's a matter of physics.

The Bible does not say: "With God, all things are a done deal"; not even "With God, all things are probable." It says: With God, all things are possible.

They have potential. It may be difficult, but not precluded. It could happen.

Someone asked Willie Nelson where he got his songs. Willie said, "The air's full of melodies. You just reach out." In this world, God gives us all sorts of melodies and possibilities. If God is with us, then we have options.

We can even get ourselves off track in life and into the biggest mess you can imagine. Yet God may give us redemptive possibilities to pull ourselves out.

Faith does not mean that we are not responsible. Faith does not mean there will not be consequences. Faith means that God's grace is amazing in the gifts God gives us. If God is with us, then open your eyes for the possibilities.

Hasting College President, Phil Dudley has a quote I enjoy very much: "A strategic plan is a risky opportunity." God gives us some possibilities that involve us taking the risk of faith.

The House of Hope Session, Trustees and program staff will be gathering at a retreat this month to open ourselves to some of the possibilities God is giving us.

Here at the House of Hope, there will be all sorts of gatherings to talk about past, present and future. We are looking at the possibilities are that God is giving us. We want to give everyone who wishes to share their vision

The opportunity to be heard, and to hear others.

Also in the next month we will be doing our annual pledge campaign. I spent some time learning about faith and finances from the former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Rev. Bob Bohl. Bob told about his experience talking with a very successful businessman and talking with him about tithing.

The man explained to Bob that he made too much money to tithe. Bob said he understood, but he would like the man to do one thing. Would the man agree to meet with Bob once a week to pray? The man asked what they would pray for.

Bob said, we will pray every week that the Lord help you earn less money, until you get down to the point where you can tithe. The man's pledge to tithe was in the mail the next week.

What was it Thomas Edison said: "When you have exhausted all the possibilities, remember this: you haven't."

Recent research shows the brains of infants form one million new synapses per second. Astonishing, isn't it? Now ask yourself, "What goes into those storage bins for information?" That is up to their parents. Will their minds be filled with spiritual junk food? Random images of violence? The messages of a culture that mistakes greed for a virtue? And that crass harshness is normal?

Or will their minds be filled with images of faith, hope and love?

We're advocating for the grace and goodness of Jesus Christ.

To be a parent is to be a spiritual guide. For us to be members of a church where there are parents raising children is to provide backup. To walk in partnership with parents.

To walk in friendship with children and teenagers. To provide examples through our lives of how the good news of Jesus Christ is real. Every week we reinforce our faith stories and give experiences of God's love. And show them in a world of greed and self-centeredness, an alternative reality based on love made real by overwhelming, inspiring generosity, that can change lives and change the world.

I am always curious about motivations: What held the rich young man back? What moves one person to be so generous, and another to sit on the sidelines?

I have a friend. He ran a store. It became four stores. Like a number of his friends, he was very successful. He has done very well in his business. Not the biggest business by far, but very successful. From time after time, this man was known to give extraordinarily generous gifts to his church and community. I wondered what moved him to be so generous. During one of our conversations, he very intentionally told me this story.

A long time ago there was a man who was exceedingly successful, but exceedingly stingy. He earned his fortune at a young age, having never shared a penny, then He sold everything, turned it into gold, and he sewed the gold into the lining of his coat.

He got onto a ship to sail across the ocean to his new home. One relatively calm day on the ocean, by accident, the man tripped and fell into the water.

He could have easily risen to the surface and swum back to the ship. But he would not take off the coat. So, the gold weighed him down and he sank to the bottom of the ocean.

Now, my friend asked me, the question is: Did the man own the gold? Or did the gold own the man?

The question for us is: will our wealth, possessions weight us down? Or will we use them to empower us and others? If so, they can raise us. Lift us. They can be part of our transcendence.

God makes all things possible: Possibility requires potential and power to come together. God gives us the potential, and the power, but will we decide to put the two together? It is up to us to do our part.

We know we have this tendency to hold back. We don't want to give it all away. But there is a paradox in faith: God does not ask us to be perfect. But to trust that when we are not perfect, that may not be the end of the story. There is potential. God has power. It seems as if it cannot happen, yet it happens.

"With human beings, it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible."

New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson writes:

“Entrance into the Kingdom of God, or eternal life, or salvation, so far from being easy, demands our best obedience and all we have. Yet all we can do is not enough to achieve the life we seek. Such life and wholeness is possible only for God, and we can receive it only as a gift.”

I think of that rich young man. The young man has it all. But he lacks in one area – he trusts in his riches to save him more than he trusts in God. He missed it. He missed the true gift. The true wealth.

The bible says: “His countenance fell”: He stopped smiling; looked shocked; he was appalled. He went away grieving, because he had had such a high opinion of himself. He thought he was the epitome of faithfulness. But he discovered he loved his wealth more than he loved God.

Wealth may be a sign that God has blessed you. Wealth may also be a sign that you have missed your destiny.

You wonder, don't you, what would have happened if the young man HAD sold everything, given it to the poor and followed Jesus? What if this young man was the St. Francis or Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King of his generation? Would he have been like William Wilberforce: set free all those slaves or Christian Fuher of Germany, whose prayer groups swelled to 70,000 and helped take down Iron Curtain.

What if the rich young man would have become the type of person that other people looked to for inspiration, someone who reorients thousands of lives? How could the world have been different if he followed where Jesus called?

Jesus loved this guy – but the man walked away from it all. No further word is ever heard about him.

Jesus' command to sell everything does not appear as a universal law in the commandments of Jesus. Rather, it is a vocation for some. Yet this story is a warning for all. The rich young man comes looking for eternal life, but, you have to ask, has his spirit already died? Don't let your wealth keep you from your true life.

The disciples are an inspiration for all. Jesus turns to his disciples, who have sacrificed everything. Jesus says, “With God all things are possible. I assure you that anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother father, children or property because of me and the good news will receive one hundred times as much now in this life.” Now. He promises heaven on earth. Imagine that.

Start with a society being torn apart with fear. The opposite of fear is faith. As Mary Ann Tolbert says, imagine a faith that “breaks across all social, cultural, religious boundaries.” Imagine generosity that does not give a rationale for war. Imagine a world where men and women treat each other with full respect -- gay, lesbian, transgender, finding equality and acceptance. Imagine the powerful and powerless, finding their shared humanity. Imagine joining together to join a new family, Jesus true family, composed of those who do the will of God.

If the opposite of faith is fear, then we as Christians are invited into a world defined by fearlessness. That is astounding. With God, all things are possible, as we live lives inspired by actual, profound, breathtaking acts of generosity, giving, and love. If we ourselves define ourselves by trusting in God not letting our wealth sink us, but letting our wealth be used by us to redefine the possibilities of the world.

Yes, this is a stewardship sermon. So please, think about the story of the rich young man over the next month as you consider your pledge. House of Hope is a world changing church, and our gifts are the embodiment of our possibilities & power guided by God’s grace.

But more than that, much more than that: think about the story of the rich young man as you consider your life. Are you weighed down, drowning in fear? Or are you lifted up: journeying in the faith that leads to true life? A true life that is more and more like heaven on earth?

The use of our wealth helps us to see: the possibilities and the power God gives us. And the possibilities and power of God beyond our capacities, through grace, that are nevertheless, given to us as a gift.

Emily Dickinson has a beautiful poetic line that says simply: “I dwell in possibility.”

Yes. Yes, we do. With God, All Things Are Possible.

Amen.