

The Impossible Made Possible
Amos 5:14-15 and Mark 10:17-31
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

My husband Josh and I took our daughter Fiona to see a children's production of Rogers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* recently. The production was adorable – the youngest actors were probably three, maybe four, playing mice sitting at Cinderella's feet. The teenagers who had the leads did a good job, moving between their spoken lines and the musical numbers with relative ease... It was fantastic, and Fiona loved it. I'd seen the show before, but I had largely remembered the music. I'd forgotten how knowing the dialogue is – how it is meant to change the story, and shape the way we see the characters: Cinderella participates in her own transformation, the Prince, from the outset, believes that all people are worthy of love and respect. The Step-Mother is a bit of a harpy, and cruel to Cinderella – consistently pointing out that she does not count our heroine as one of her “real” daughters. But in one early scene, she provides a bit of context, a bit of rhyme and reason, for her gold-digging, self-promoting ways.

As she sits with her “real” daughters at the kitchen table, this matriarch does her best to explain to the younger women why she is so insistent on getting them married off to someone suitable, that is, to someone wealthy.

Where do you think money comes from?

From the bank?

And the bank gets money from where?

Well, it grows... well, not on trees, but...

Money doesn't grow on anything! It's inherited!

We are meant, I think, to note the irony – that all around them, people are working, people are earning their livelihood – even most of the potential suitors for the daughters are working class. But the Mother, terrible though she may be, is right about one thing: for much of our cultural history – certainly in biblical history – money is hard to come by for women unattached, unprotected, unprovided for by a man. There's a reason widows and children are consistently singled out as the most vulnerable in the Scriptures: they are not allowed to work, often they cannot hold property. They are allowed only to beg – or to marry again, if they're lucky. If they have a law-abiding brother-in-law. The status of widows is a critical plot point in many biblical narratives – from Ruth on down to the widow's mite.

Money, or the lack thereof, shapes relationships, shapes lives. In the production we saw yesterday, despite the presence of a Fairy Godmother making the impossible possible, Cinderella is nearly dissuaded from pursuing the love of her life because she's ashamed of being poor.

In fairy tales and in real life, money makes a difference.

Theologian Kathryn Tanner begins her important book *Economy of Grace* with this assessment: *The economy dominates our world today as never before, for better or worse. Economic goods bring every other sort with them. If you have money, you can have a good education, good health care, the respect of one's peers, a political post, and so on. And therefore every other sort of good is often simply geared to gaining the goods of wealth and economic security. What is an excellent education worth, for example, if it doesn't mean a well-paying job upon graduation? In short, all goods in our world tend to turn on the hinge of money – as either what brings money or what money buys.* (ix)

Money makes a difference. Tanner's book argues that it makes far too much of a difference; she contends that the Christian story offers not only a powerful critique of this reality, but also an alternate vision of economy... one that is not harsh, or unjust, one in which decisions are not made out of positions of competition for

limited resources. Tanner lays out and describes, rather, an *economy of grace*.

In our Gospel lesson for the morning, we are told the story of the rich young man – a story in which money once more, as so often is the case, figures prominently – too prominently. *As [Jesus] 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?"* It's a good question and one we can probably assume is asked in earnest. Wouldn't we all like to know the answer? Jesus, please note, keeps answering with more questions – but the young man continues undeterred. Jesus asks him about his religious practices: have you kept the commandments? He even adds a commandment to the traditional Decalogue – the ten – we're familiar with: Don't defraud. And the young man – excitedly, dejectedly, maybe – affirms that, yes, he's obeyed all the commandments, has done so for years.

I wonder a bit about the tone of his voice here. Is he glad to be able to tell Jesus that he's been living a just and faithful life? Is he hopeful that Jesus will tell him that's all he needs, and to keep up the good work? Or do you think he's disappointed, frustrated – because he's done all this, followed the law, tried his very best to be faithful, and yet feels, knows with a certainty deep in the pit of his stomach, that he's still not there? For all of this, he still lacks

the assurance of grace – he still wonders if he'll gain eternal life. It's the uncertainty, and the deep longing for Jesus's assurance, that drives him to his knees.

We can understand his predicament, his frustration. Tanner points out what is seemingly obvious: *grace is invisible*. And so we look for signs of grace, we, good detectives, seek out evidence of graced, blessed lives. We may see it in those who are living into the commandments – those who seem able to order their lives in the way God intends. But as often as not, we often look to see who's doing well. Tanner gives us a brief history of the notion in Christianity: *With the birth of a state church in the age of Constantine, power, privilege and success were often taken for such signs. Those in charge, those whom the fates of this world favor, are the chosen of God, God's lieutenants and servants...*(6) She then moves into a discussion of what sociologist Max Weber first called *the Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In the theological worldview with which the early American Calvinists lived, one never knew if God was going to damn or redeem you. God is an inscrutable figure, whose will can't be known. So, Tanner writes, *despite traditional worries about the corrupting influence of money, success in one's worldly calling steps into the breach. The elect of God are the very ones whose self-discipline and asceticism in worldly life make for economic success... So the*

religious justification for a life of wealth and economic achievement is born and, along with it, the association of poverty with moral and spiritual degradation. (7)

This man who comes to Jesus has spent his life trying to figure out, for sure, if he will gain access to the eternal life. He knows grace is invisible, and he's looking for signs. He thinks he's found some – a lot of them actually, his life appears well-blessed. And yet, and yet...

Jesus sees and hears the hunger in this man's voice, the longing to be with God. And so he tells him the one thing he lacks: *go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*

And the man, as we have heard, can't do it. He goes away, grieving – and there is cause for grief, he has been offered the keys to a life rich in meaning, abundant in love and the assurance of grace, and he will not take them. Because he has many possessions, and he cannot bring himself to give them up.

Money is important. Often too important. Instead of being an instrumental thing – something we use, something we like to have, given the option – it becomes *the* determining factor of our lives. The thing that shapes everything else. I confess, I have often said that I just want to be comfortable. I want to have enough money not to have to worry about it. But the rich young man in our

Gospel lesson reminds us that that isn't how it works. The more we have, the more power it exerts in our lives. We get used to it. We start to order our lives so that we can keep it; we make decisions based on how we can amass more of it. And in that, the keys to the eternal life slip out of our fingers.

There was a great cartoon in *The New Yorker* this week, featuring Noah and one of his sons, standing on the deck of the ark, watching a single file line of animals board the boat. One mouse, one hippo, one giraffe. The caption reads: *I know we have to cut costs, but is bringing only one of each a good idea?* What seems at first to be financial prudence turns out to be self-defeating folly.

This is the problem of money for the rich young man, and, I'd say, the problem of money for many of us. Theologian Paul Tillich famously described God as our "ultimate concern," but the trouble for many of us is that God is actually not our ultimate concern. The man in our Gospel lesson thought his was God, but discovered it was money. How many of us might, when pressed, discover the same?

Jesus is not, I suppose, particularly surprised by the young man's response, though he might have been disappointed. The disciples, though, seem fairly shocked. If not this earnest, commandment-keeping rich kid, how will it be possible for

anybody to live the abundant life, to participate in the eternal life? The more things we have competing for primacy, for ultimacy, in our lives – the harder it will be. And, indeed, in this life we always have so many competing goods – so many things we want – health, and love, and wealth, and family, and happiness – that it is well nigh impossible for us to choose God

What hope is there, then? The disciples seem to anticipate our own question. *Why bother?*

In Rogers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother doesn't simply grant our heroine's wish. She wants her to see how ridiculous it is to just hope for something. She wants her to appreciate that just wishing for something, even in the deepest depths of her heart, doesn't make it happen. Cinderella figures out how to make her impossible wish come true – she'll fix her old dress, and hitch a ride in someone else's carriage... Only then does the magic begin to happen. *Impossible things are happening every day...* the fairy godmother sings.

Jesus wants us to know that the key to the eternal life isn't something we can earn – isn't something we can amass or inherit like wealth, isn't something we win through ordeal like a golden key in *The Legend of Zelda*. But that doesn't mean that we can't participate in the way God makes the impossible possible. For

indeed, that is what Jesus promises: *For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.*

It sounds like nonsense, doesn't it? Like wishful thinking? Like a fairy tale? Grace, right? Crazy stuff. But I'll tell you – that's what we're in the business of seeking in the church, as Christians living together. The impossible made possible. Our sense of wizened self-preservation, our wariness to hope, our habits of cynicism all tell us that this is bunk. Fine for Jesus, fine for the disciples... but an economy of grace?

I did a degree in public policy along with my ministry degree at the University of Chicago, and I loved it. Because policy is, at its best, about making the impossible possible. As a society, we express our needs and our hopes for our common life, and policy makers do their best to figure out how to make it happen. That is, roughly sketched, called non-incremental policy-making. For a number of years, we've preferred incremental policy making – taking baby steps based on what we think is feasible. Often, it's based on what we think we can afford. Oh, sure, we'd like to have universal, high-quality preschool available... but we can only afford to give it x number of dollars. Maybe we can expand the program next year.

I'm drawing my strokes a little broadly here – there are certainly instances when incremental change is the faithful,

responsible way to go. But when you want to do something big, when you want to change the game, when you want a shot at the eternal life, you need a vision and a leap of faith. The textbook policy example of this came in May of 1961, when President Kennedy stood in front of a joint session of Congress and announced that, within ten years, the US was going to put a man on the moon. Impossible. Ridiculous. Nuts. They had NASA, they'd done some dabbling in manned crafts orbiting the earth... but they were nowhere close to a man on the moon. Still, this was the vision, this was the goal: a man on the moon within ten years. Eight years later, they did it. One giant policy leap for one giant leap for humankind. The impossible made possible.

Churches are capable – I'd say even more capable than the feds – of doing this very same thing. Not launching astronauts into space, but of casting a vision – even one that seems impossible – and, empowered by nothing less than the grace of God, bringing it to life. Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor in the South Bronx, wrote a wonderful book called *Breathing Spaces*, about the life of her congregation. When she arrived, it was an older, dying church, out of touch with the neighborhood. But as she and the members began to cast of vision of what their church was called to be, as they began to listen to the urging of the Holy Spirit, they began to hear the needs of the community. For worship, yes, and for grace

and love. But also for a job training program, and a food pantry, and an after-school program, and for representation in the community to clean up the corrupt local school board, and to work on the incredible pollution that had given disgusting percentages of the neighborhood's children life-threatening cases of asthma. The community hungered for these things, but the church had few resources to get them – to get these programs off the ground. No funding, no space, insufficient staff. They had only an impossible vision. So they prayed, and they wrote grant proposals, and they looked for funding and they wrangled seminary interns for labor, and they worshiped and they made friends with wealthier churches looking for mission projects, and they wrote more grants. They suffered many defeats... construction problems for their new community center, many, many folks dying unnecessarily of street and domestic violence, of addiction, of asthma. But slowly, slowly, the vision came to life. They believed in the impossibility of God's presence and guidance, and it became possible. God's grace, as visible as the nose on my face.

We're in the midst of our stewardship campaign now, friends. We're asking you to make your pledge. Many of you have already participated – continue to participate in casting the vision for the future of this church. We have already begun to discern our mission: to love God, to serve others, and to grow

together. We long to be a hub of Christ directed activity radiating out to the world from the heart of St. Charles. We are already on our way, but it will require the faithfulness of all those in this body of Christ – all of us, working together, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to serve in the way we are called to do. There’s plenty standing in our way, nothing more limiting than our own fears of financial insecurity. But there is so much more to move us onward, to show us God’s grace plainly present here among us. Heidi Neumark’s story is an incredibly compelling one... but I’ll tell you, it’s not just the work of the church that makes me trust her witness. It’s the way she knows, with every breath she has, in every exchange with her young son, the power of God’s love and grace. She writes:

So often love and energy feel divided, but even more often they are multiplied. For years, Hans had a recurrent bedtime question after I’d tell him that I loved him:

“Mommy, are you sure that you love me?”

“Of course, Hans, you know I love you. I love you with all my heart.”

“With all your heart?”

“Yes, with all my heart.”

“How many hearts to you have Mommy?”

“Just one”

“But how can you love me with all your heart if you love Ana, too?”

The answer was always the same: “Because love is a miracle.

Because I can. Because I do.”

Amen.