

Doing What *Is* Possible

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Mark 6:1-13 (NRSV)

¹He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

⁴Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

¹⁰He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Today's gospel lesson tells of a time when Jesus *couldn't* get something done.

Jesus had been traveling throughout the region around the Sea of Galilee. He had been preaching and teaching about the need to repent, to turn away from self-centered, destructive, ungodly attitudes and ways of living. He called people to turn their lives around, to seek God's way and welcome God's spirit. He brought healing power to people with diseases of mind and body. Indeed, in my message last week we heard of Jesus restoring life to a little girl.

So the next thing Mark's gospel tells us is that Jesus made a stop in his old stomping ground. He had returned to Nazareth, the village where he had grown up. As a young man it was the place where he had practiced his trade – laboring as what the Greeks called a τεκτον ("tekton") meaning one who works with wood or stone or metal. Now a traveling preacher and teacher, Jesus arrived accompanied by a cadre of disciples. He was preceded by a reputation as an insightful teacher, as a worker of wonders, as a conduit of God's healing power.

Jesus went to Nazareth's synagogue and expounded on the Hebrew scriptures. The way he described and interpreted the scriptures was enlightening, inspiring, exciting. The people exclaimed, "Wow – we've never heard these scriptures come to life so vividly!" ...And then someone squinted at Jesus and said, "And yet... this is the carpenter, right? This is Mary's boy?" Others started to frown. "Yes, this Jesus, he's the one whose brothers James, Joses and Judas are still in town here, right – and his sisters, too?" A cold front of doubt blew into town. The mood of the crowd chilled. "Who does

he think he is, acting like he's somebody, telling us that God wants us to change how we live?" It was as if, on cue, they turned their backs on him. They weren't having another word. In verse 6 Mark the gospel writer wrote, "And [Jesus] was amazed at their unbelief."

Well, the unbelief of most of them, anyway. Mark also wrote, "And [Jesus] could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." Most of the people there had already closed their minds to anything Jesus had to offer, but a few were receptive. A few were trusting. A few were healed.

Jesus tried to bring the good news of God's love to the people of Nazareth. But human nature being what it is, that was pretty much impossible. As Jesus said on his way out of the synagogue, quoting a proverbial saying, "Prophets are respected everywhere except in their own hometown...."¹

This incident poses a question that we encounter in our world and in our daily lives. That question is simply, "When what needs to happen is impossible, what are we to do?" And the way Jesus responded to the dismissive people of his hometown provides us with an example: when we cannot do the impossible, we can at least do what is possible.

Even when Jesus was faced with the impossibility of getting through to the people of his hometown, he did what was possible. First, he attended to the few ailing folks who had faith in him as God's agent of mercy, the ones who came to him to receive healing for their minds or bodies. Then he paired up his disciples and sent them out on missionary assignments, to urge people to repent, and to cure those who sought healing. Jesus warned them not to attempt the impossible: he advised them that when they were not welcomed, when people turned their backs on them, they shouldn't bull-headedly persist. No, they should "shake the dust off their feet" and move on, putting their efforts toward what *was* possible, preaching to those who were receptive.

Sometimes the need before us is overwhelming and satisfying the need is simply beyond the realm of possibility. That shouldn't stop us from acting at all. Consider the example of Richard Frechette.

Richard Frechette is a Catholic priest who went to Haiti in 1987 to work in an orphanage. Frechette described conditions in Haiti as terrible on almost every level, and, in general, not getting better. He was motivated to take on more and more services for children.... Father Frechette launched the St. Luke Foundation that has provided day-to-day help and education to thousands of children in Haiti.... Its operations now include schools for 8,000 younger children and 1,200 high-school-age children. The foundation has also launched businesses employing Haitians and helps meet food needs of many. Its programs touch the lives of an estimated 150,000

¹ Mk. 6:4a Good News Translation

Haitians each year. “I don’t see so much the bad part of it,” he said. “I see what’s possible.... We should do what we can to keep ‘the banquet of life’ open to all. When you do the right thing, the next right thing will happen,” he said...²

I can think of an example right here where we do what’s possible in the face of an impossible task.

Each month in this church we designate the first Sunday of the month as “Food Sunday.” Leading up to that day we encourage worshipers to remember that there are individuals and families in our area who struggle with food insecurity on a regular basis: their wages are stretched too thin by their monthly budget and unforeseen expenses. When dollars get that scarce, often what suffers is healthy food for their children or themselves. Our Mission Outreach encourages us to remember those women and men and children when we’re shopping at the grocery store and when we’re stocking our overflowing cupboard and pantries.

The reality is that there are people dealing with food insecurity all over the world. You and I cannot fix that. The matter is too big. It’s impossible for us. But what is possible for us is to begin to address what is right around us. So we bring in an extra bag or two of healthy non-perishable groceries each month to support the work of our local food pantry.

We can do what is possible as we face other seemingly impossible struggles. That’s what the Matthew 25 initiative is all about. The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel contains the story Jesus told about how people will be judged for what they did or didn’t do to help persons who are disadvantaged and powerless. The famous verse that expresses the basis for judgment is when Jesus says, “What you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Our congregation has joined hundreds of other Presbyterian congregations in embracing the Matthew 25 initiative. As individuals, as churches, and as collections of congregations we want to do what we can – we want to do what is possible – to bring remedies to seemingly impossible struggles – struggles like:

- finding peace among contentious nations and peoples;
- addressing causes of social and racial injustice;
- advocating for homeless persons and for adequate, affordable housing;
- assuring access to health care.

² Edited from Alan J. Borsuk, “Opus Award Winners: Huge Humanitarian Impact from Doing What Is Possible,” Marquette University Law School Faculty Blog, February 8, 2013. <https://law.marquette.edu/facultyblog/2013/02/opus-prize-winners-huge-humanitarian-impact-from-doing-what-is-possible/>. Retrieved January 29, 2021, <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/93041311#> accessed 6/26/2021

Huge problems that none of us can solve but each of us can address by doing what is possible given where we are and who we are and what we have at our disposal.

How might we apply this “do-what’s-possible” principle on a more personal basis?

One place might be when you have offended someone, and that person has rebuffed your attempts to make amends. While the offended individual may remain intransigent, others who were less directly affected by your offense may be open to giving you another chance or putting the matter behind them. So, do what’s possible and make peace with them.

Another place might be in gift giving, where you have the “perfect” gift in mind for a loved one, only to find out that it’s no longer available or is beyond your reach budget-wise. What’s still possible, however, is some other genuine expression of your affection for that person (which may mean more than the gift anyway).

When we reflect on this story, it can surprise, even shock us: hearing about a time when Jesus wasn’t able to do what he had hoped, but instead he opted to do what *was* possible in that circumstance. But hearing about that incident today, perhaps this may be God’s way of giving you a nudge.

- Perhaps you feel stuck or overwhelmed by needs of the world that cry out to you.
- Perhaps there are unresolved matters in your life that you don’t know how to begin to deal with.

But in this story, perhaps God is giving you a nudge. You can put into practice your intention to follow the example of Jesus. How? First, acknowledge what you’d like to do but *aren’t* able to do in a situation. Then, accept God’s grace to do whatever it is that God *does* make possible for you to do.