

Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast – Matthew 5:21-37
Marc Mullinax's reflection for The Circle of Mercy, February 13, 2011

From a less-ancient testimony, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

The Queen said with great decision: 'nobody can do two things at once, you know. Let's consider your age to begin with--how old are you?'

'I'm seven and a half exactly.'

'You needn't say "exactly,"' the Queen remarked: 'I can believe it without that. Now I'll give YOU something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day.'

'I can't believe THAT!' said Alice.

'Can't you?' the Queen said in a pitying tone. 'Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.'

Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one CAN'T believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

13.8 billion years ago, give or take, our universe came into being. Scientists call it "The Big Bang". Spun out from that moment in time/space, go the most current estimates, there are 100 to 200 billion galaxies in the Universe, each of which has hundreds of billions of stars. A recent supercomputer simulation put that number even higher: 500 billion. In other words, there could be a galaxy out there for every star in the Milky Way.

In our own galaxy, 100-300 billion stars shine. At most, 2,500 stars are available to the unaided eye in ideal conditions from any given spot. Telescopes, however, show us what used to be impossible: there's a LOT of stuff we can see.

But wait, there's even more that we cannot see. Dark matter and dark energy comprise perhaps 75-95% of the mass, weight and energy of the universe. These we've yet to directly see or measure. That is, we can see only 5-25% of what comprises the universe. We can't even reliably measure, nor say with any confidence, what this dark stuff is. Our atom, quark, proton, and neutron vocabulary don't work. All we know is, that which we cannot see has a LOT of mass and energy.

"We are an impossibility in an impossible universe," said Ray Bradbury. Improbable residents we are, of this impossible-to-understand vast universe. But here we are, visible and invisible stuff flowing through us even at this moment.

But wait, there's more. Our universe may well be one of perhaps an infinite number of universes in what may be called the multi-verse, each universe with its own set of physics, cosmologies, rules, periodic tables. So, in a way, anything's possible.

Put that in your "Just who are we?" pipe and smoke that!

"Just who are we?" is the sub-text to my classes at MHC, and the YMCA. Rarely can I drop the chance to take a text we're considering – Plato, Augustine, Jesus, Confucius, even The Rolling Stones – and have it sound out for us what it is that we are, and capable of. The great texts of our world, those that survive, seem to call forth from us a key aerobic exercise of the soul: the calisthenics of **choice**. These

immortal texts are outworkings all of Socrates' most famous of phrasings, in literal Greek, "The unexamined life is not a human one." The life we examine is the life we will die for.

Making those life choices about how one is to live, and live best ... well, aren't they usually the risky ones? I'm not talking about the choice between a green and a red Prius, or yellow and blue M&Ms. Instead, to what Polaris will we orient our entire life, such that it has the maximum depth and texture, and the minimum of fluff? Ask people you respect: the examined life is hard, difficult, sometimes deadly, but always worth it. Each of our three ministers could share a few stories here. They have each, like many of us here, paid for their life choices with great sacrifices.

The lectionary passages for today all call for huge decisions. Like it's always decision time. "The time is always right to do the right thing," said Martin Luther King, Jr. Like it's never time to coast ... go on a moral vacation, play your second-best cards, lay down something that's merely "good enough," or "just get by."

If read closely, the Sermon on the Mount should be a scary text. I mean, if we started practicing these impossible calls to intentional blindness and bloody stumps, well, I think some of us might wind up before a judge, trying to explain a strange logic, "Well ... You see, Your Honor. Better a bloody stump than my entire being discarded for good in the dump of souls. Better to go blind than be without free choice about what I see."

Question. Are these hard sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount really difficult? Wouldn't it be better to be able to dismiss them as wholesale impossible? Out of hand ludicrous? Is Jesus trustworthy, or not? Would we buy a used car from him after he says things like, "If you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire"? Hard to teach these to our children, right? Why?

The great texts, like Jesus' Sermon, do shine clear lights onto those parts of human experience we do not like to tread. For my students, I call it that area between the really impossible and really, really difficult. This, I feel, is the place, the playground, the soul-crafting site, where human beings are made and cared for. It's where Jesus meets us. This narrow space – between the impossible and the merely very difficult – is the holy ground on which the truths and passions of our lives get decided and lived out. Sure, we'd sometimes rather cave, take the short-cut, and somehow wiggle out of this call to a response-able life. You know, plead the "sanity defense" – because anyone who's normal and sane would never take Jesus that seriously.

But in this immensely huge universe, in this small envelope of space between the truly impossible and the truly very difficult, I want to live. I want to decide faith, race, and other life matters in this ambiguous place between the impossible and the really difficult. I don't want to mistake the "difficult" for the "impossible." Science fiction writer Stephen Donaldson wrote: "Everything that passes unattempted remains impossible, and our ignorance of the impossible will, on Judgment Day, mock us."^[1]

It is easy to adjust; almost anything can become normal. The human being can survive in almost any physical or psychic environment. From Club Med to Club Auschwitz, from the tropics to the Arctic, we populate it all. We survive by our infinite malleability. We can adjust to the merely possible, and we can adjust to a life that churns, like butter, the cream of the impossible into the butter of the normal.

I don't want this to sound like a business pep talk, but is not the impossible usually what we have yet to try? St. Francis of Assisi, what did you mean when you said, "Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible." Mother Teresa, why would you say, "We the willing, led by the unknowing, are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much, with so little, for so long, we are now qualified to do anything, with nothing"?

How, then, do we break the cycle of this addictive habit to the possible, break this allergy against the impossible? I mean, we get so adjusted to things that after awhile, even the smell of crap becomes bearable. One side of church history is our adjustment to the crazy situations – wars, racisms, violence – where entire classes of people are malignly neglected, ignored and even actively discriminated against.

The more I read the Sermon on the Mount, and study Jesus, the more aware I am of how many times Christianity has become a religion of the merely possible. The voices that say, "We've never done it that way before" can be pretty loud, numerous and seductive. Christianity, at least here in the United States, has become less and less fascinating. We have given atheists less and less to disbelieve. The Jesus presented on TV and radio appears more like a Santa Claus taking names of the naughty and the nice. "Churches have always been the leading cause of the need for churches," wrote David Duncan in his highly recommended novel *The Brothers K* (p. 431).

"Forgive us, world. Forgive us for the embarrassing things we have done in the name of God," says Shane Claiborne. And his apology could be our apology. An apology to those who have been affected negatively by the church's inability to teach and model the life of Jesus. I am a member here precisely because it is difficult; we strive and struggle to include and love all, as we imagine God doing the same.

When I get into trouble (and I do) it's always when I say Jesus was asking the impossible, and I then perform some variation of these specific maladies listed by Jesus. I commit divorce ... when I disassociate with the Other. When I get angry, I usually do it with a crowd, seeking anonymity in mass approval, or I get curiously angry at the very things I think God gets angry at. These angers rarely change. They become like a favorite old chair in which I rest.

What if Jesus meant all this stuff about anger and reconciliation, lust and swearing? What if he were serious about loving enemies, praying for persecutors, and taking up that instrument of slow death – the Cross – into one's own life? What if he meant all these impossible things? What if our mission, just waiting for our choice, is to bear witness to the power of compounded love to a world bent on self-seduction? Here is the good news, friends: The normal state of affairs – the new normalcy, the new possibility – is that the fruits of the spirit do not have to be violence, inequalities, envy, force, suspicion, neglect or hate. There is no law that says these are all the possibilities we have.

The impossible is not recognized in science, so why should we discount it from the spiritual? Let us never tell our young people that anything cannot be done. God may have been waiting centuries for someone just plain tired of the possible, to do, well, anything. It could be you, your kids ... anyone.

My fellow Alices and Alexes in Wonderland. We are called to the impossible, by the impossible, for the impossible. We're made of that. We're made for that. Let's review:

Partnership with a Cuban congregation? Impossible idea 10 years ago.

The new living arrangements that Circle members have worked out in Cuba, Colombia, North Asheville, Swan Mountain Farm? Impossible to contemplate a short while ago.

An African-American president? How many thought it'd never happen in our lifetime?

Egypt born again. NYTimes: "One by one the protesters withstood each weapon in the arsenal of the Egyptian autocracy — first the heavily armed riot police, then a ruling party militia and finally the state's powerful propaganda machine." "We took our freedom; Egypt is born again". After 30 years, in 18 days, Egypt is back.

The Just Budget Mission group at COM? Can you say, "Don Quixote"? Some windmills just have to be tilted. And overturned. Let us not meet or plan too casually – as if there's nothing at stake – lest we lose the chance to speak an impossible 'yes' or 'no' to power. That which we have not yet done ... We are made of it, and designed for it. Of this I am sure.

Let us therefore stay in close touch, telling our stories of grace, of the impossible, dreaming the impossible, fighting the unfightable.

Alice in Wonderland depicts the world reversed. After the conversation I read aloud a few minutes ago, Lewis Carroll says of her, "Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible."

Let me commend Alice and her curiosity to us all. She remains a model for those unwilling to stay tied to proven preconceptions. I think she was the patron saint of folks 50 years ago who were unwilling to get accustomed to the impossibility of racial harmony. She remains the mentor to women seeking a truer equality. She keeps whispering in the ear of those who say that gays, lesbians, bisexuals or transgendered people are *somehow* a problem. And Alice will accompany us into a new world where it seems utterly impossible to right our oh-so-wrong decisions and relationships with carbon. Oh, how we still need St. Alice! She is our patron saint of the impossible....

"I can't believe THAT!" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."