

September 7, 2025

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“The Impossible”

Luke 14:25-35

Sometimes it seems that I’m proclaiming the impossible. I’m not talking about the Gospel. Though such incredible love is unfathomable to us, God the Father most certainly did indeed send His Son, Jesus Christ, into our human flesh to live perfectly, die sacrificially, and rise victoriously to gain our salvation. He delivers this reality to us all as free gift of grace in His Word and Sacraments. This isn’t impossible; it just is the factual love of God in Christ.

What seems impossible is the reaction we are called to have to this gift. In August I preached God’s Word about how, in light of Christ, we shouldn’t be anxious, how we should endure all the assaults and afflictions of the world as Christ did, how each and every day we should strive to live in Christ’s example of love, how we should be willing always to assume the humblest, lowest standing before others around us. And it’s not speculation. It’s from Jesus Himself in Luke’s Gospel and through the inspiration from the Holy Spirit in the epistles.

And today, while Jesus is clearly using hyperbolic language to drive His point home, the literal meaning here sounds impossible. *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”*

Harsh. Very harsh. For sinners whose main problem is the love of self, the love of me and mine, this truly seems impossible. This is so harsh that I expect it is words like these that cause some folks to turn their back on Christ and leave the faith. If you must do the impossible to follow Christ, what’s the point?

But I think the impossibility of us actually accomplishing this may be the point in and of itself. Listen to what Jesus says next: *“For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.”*

If our salvation is building that tower to heaven, or if it is going into battle with the overwhelming forces of evil arrayed against us, can we pull it off? No! I think this is at least part of the point Jesus is making. For us, yes, it is impossible.

That used to really trouble me because I understood this talk of building a tower and raising an army as somehow calling me to make a rational judgment about all that I must give up to follow Christ. A whole lot of Bibles title this section “The Cost of Discipleship” and this vibe certainly is present here. Losing things of this world, losing one’s earthly life itself, may be necessary in following Jesus.

But the flip side is this; what does it take to finish the tower to heaven, what does it take to be victorious over the forces of evil? Jesus! Part of counting the cost is seeing clearly what is necessary to reach the goal; reach the victory! And while yes, you and I struggle mightily to forsake all things of the world for the sake of our salvation, Jesus did this perfectly on our behalf! When it comes to counting the cost, Jesus was able to and indeed did forsake all things for the sake of obedience to the Father’s will that His creation would be redeemed!

So while yes, Jesus is making crystal clear that following Him above all things is necessary, it has to be understood that His work is to redeem those infected by sin who are not up to doing this task rightly on their own. It is impossible for us, but possible in God's grace in Christ. In light of this, we follow Christ as our greatest good. It is impossible for us to do so perfectly, but though we trip up in sin, we repent and follow again the one who walks in perfect righteousness for our sake.

But this does not at all soften Christ's closing remark: *"So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."*

You cannot set limitations. You cannot follow Jesus yet say something of your life is "hands off" to Him. In following Jesus one renounces any right to anything of this world, no matter how dear. We love our families, but the example of the early church is clear, if it's a choice between Christ and family, you renounce family. Christ set the agenda. Christ is the agenda. No exceptions.

So I kind of feel like a broken record here, but once again I will point out that what is a very hard saying to our ears is actually a Gospel invitation of Christ. He is making plain what He is calling you to, but He is clearly calling you to follow Him into His kingdom forever. Like His walk here was, yours may be one of struggle, sacrifice and hardship. But it's worth the cost. He gains you forgiveness, true life, victory, salvation. Nothing else of this world can make this offer.

How do you apply this to your life? In broad terms I'd say it bears looking around your world for that which you resist renouncing for Christ; anyplace or anyone around whom you might set conditions or barriers, that which you would not give up for Christ. Then repent of that. Do what you can to get things in the right order—Christ first, all else a distant second.

This might be really weird. I mean, I've never been a parent, but looking at your beloved child and saying "you come second to Jesus," that's just counter to human nature. But only Jesus saves you. Only Jesus saves the child. Only Jesus is your Lord, Creator, Redeemer. It is what it is and it's not like Christ hasn't spelled it out. Get it straight, repent of what you lack in your inability to live it out...and follow Jesus. It might seem impossible...follow Jesus anyway. If there is one thing the Christian faith we share makes simple and clear, it is that Jesus is best for all, so follow Him above all.

I'm tempted to skip the last bit because I just don't quite get the salt talk in the Bible. Jesus says, *"Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

Salt was all about seasoning and preserving food in first-century Israel. And following the difficult and wonderful teaching of Jesus, I kind of have to see the salt here as the struggle with Christ's call to discipleship. If His teaching stirs up passion and struggle between your human nature and the Holy Spirit's leading, I think that's the salt. That's the seasoning and preserving of your faith in action.

If you felt nothing at such a severe teaching, that would be unsaltiness. That would be a lack of interest in forsaking anything for Christ. I pray that, by the Spirit's leading, Jesus' words here have stirred up a desire to accept His truth, a willingness to renounce all things for His sake, and an intention to live life salty, following Jesus intently, repentantly and faithfully, trusting in His doing what is impossible for you, that the tower to heaven, the victory over all evil enemies, stands accomplished in Christ, for you.

Amen.