

6 Impossible Things Before Lunch

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Sermon

Alice had lost her muchness. But she needed to find it again, before the frabjous day. You see, she was almost an adult now. In fact, she had been at a surprise engagement party – a surprise because she didn't realize she was getting engaged – she had been at *her* surprise engagement party when that intriguing white rabbit in a waistcoat had appeared. Rather than give the man who was, apparently, her intended an answer to his rather abrupt and public question, Alice had excused herself and promptly fallen down the rabbit hole.

There was something about where she landed that was familiar, and yet not quite. As she explored, she was convinced she was dreaming. Those who had been waiting for her return – and indeed, many had been – were convinced that the wrong Alice had fallen down the hole. Who was this disbelieving, self-centered grown-up, and where was the strong, assertive girl they had known many years ago?

But Alice didn't remember ever having visited Wonderland before. Or “Underland” as the residents themselves called it. And she struggled in the strange place, which had even higher expectations of her than the surprise engagement party had held. Indeed, she was supposed to be a hero – she was supposed to slay the jabberwocky on the frabjous day and thus free the people from the rule of the decapitation happy Red Queen and return the compassionate White Queen to power.

Which, of course, was impossible. She could not fight the jabberwocky, certainly not beat it. And yet, the adventure continued to pull her in that direction. She was able to retrieve the vorpal sword from the red queen, and was now lingering in the castle of the White Queen, trying to decide who she was, whether this was a dream or not – she struggled to find her

muchness.

Little did I know back in March, when picking my sermon title for today, that this would be a Wonderland weekend for me. Little did I know that my oldest daughter would be in a production of *Alice in Wonderland* this weekend....little did I know she would be Alice. But as these serendipitous occasions sometime occur, I find myself up to my eyeballs in mad hatters and march hares this weekend.

I loved the play at Walden Theater, how it captures Alice as a child on that first visit to Wonderland. And I loved the movie *Alice in Wonderland*, where Alice is nearing adulthood. In the movie, the journey that Alice takes is a coming of age story – a young woman finding her power, re-discovering her muchness, and in the process, finding herself. I don't want to give too much away, but this *is* a Disney movie after all, so you know it will have something resembling a happy ending.

After a period of intense inner turmoil, Alice indeed suits up in the suit of armor that had been waiting for a champion. And she picks up the vorpal sword, prepared to fight the jabberwocky.

As the fight begins, Alice remembers the wisdom of her departed father. He was a businessman, with a fierce unrest at his core. In arguing with his colleagues over a new trade route that they deemed impossible, her father, had replied: "Gentlemen, the only way to achieve the impossible, is to believe it's possible." Now facing the Jabberwocky, Alice, who inherited her father's strength and stubbornness, decides to list the various impossible things that were, as she recently realized, possible afterall.

"I try to believe in as many as six impossible things before breakfast." She says to herself, taking up the vorpal sword. "Count them, Alice. One, there are drinks that make you shrink." She slashes this way and that – the sword seems to have a mind of its own.

"Two, there are foods that make you grow. Three, animals can talk." She dodges and rolls as the jabberwocky attacks with jaws that bite, with claws that catch.

“Four, cats can disappear. Five, there is a place called Underland.” Snicker-snack, goes the sword, as she parries and thrusts, beginning to trust the impossible may, indeed, be possible. “Six, I can slay the Jabberwocky.” And, indeed, she does. Gloriously.

Alice had lost her muchness. But she found it again. And she, too, came to believe that the impossible is only such if we believe it to be. That if we believe, even impossible things become possible.

I think that there are times when we, as individuals, as a country, as a church community – times when *we* lose our muchness, and times when we find it and prove the impossible to be possible afterall. And so this morning, I would like to go on a brief journey – a journey that will take us, not to Underland or Wonderland or any fantastical place like that – but a journey that will remind us of some of the things that were believed to be impossible and then accomplished regardless. And though it is a bit too late for six impossible things before *breakfast* (I am guessing you have all already eaten something this morning) – I do think we can come up with six impossible things before *lunch*.

But I am going to need your help with this one. Everytime you hear me say “That would be impossible!” - I need you all to remind me. I need you to say “The only way to achieve the impossible, is to believe that it is possible.” Let's try that a few times. When I say “That would be impossible!” You say “The only way to achieve the impossible is to believe that it is possible!” *practice a few times*

So let us begin our journey.

Impossible thing number 1: In our country, only 150 years ago – which really is not long when measured against the length of human culture – it was thought impossible to abolish

slavery. Agriculture in the southern states was based on slavery, indeed slavery was it's backbone, and many people believed that it was impossible to have agriculture in the south *without* having slavery. Much like the arguments many Unitarians engage in now over the immigration laws in Arizona, there was much arguing in our Unitarian and Universalist churches over abolition, as well. Many thought it was necessary, but others said “**That would be impossible!**”

“The only way to achieve the impossible is to believe that it is possible!”

And indeed, we know now that the South can, and did, survive. The impossible turned out to be possible after all. It wasn't easy – no one said anything about it being *easy* – but it was possible.

Impossible thing number 2: Along similar lines was granting women the right to vote in this country. It astonishes me that we are only celebrating the 90th anniversary of this monumental feat *this year!* After over 50 years of struggle, women were granted the right to vote in 1920, though some pockets passed local laws earlier. Some of the arguments against suffrage – against the right to vote - rested on the ridiculous assertions that women could not think calmly but were ruled by emotions, or that women weren't intelligent enough to be given the responsibility of full participation – or that giving women the right to vote would lead to having to allow them into other avenues of participation in our government, such as congress or the military. **And that would be impossible!**

“The only way to achieve the impossible is to believe that it is possible!”

Ninety years have shown that women, indeed, do have the faculties to participate in

government – though the power of voting, through participation in our military, even to the highest levels of government. What would women 90 years ago have thought of Hilary Rodham Clinton running for president, and even now being Secretary of State? The impossible turned out to be possible, afterall.

Impossible thing number 3: Seventy years ago, many of even our greatest minds believed it was impossible to travel to the moon. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein went so far as to declare “We all believe that it isn’t possible to get to the moon; but there might be people who believe that it is possible and that sometimes happens. We say: these people do not know a lot that we know. And, let them be never so sure of their belief—they are wrong and we know it.” A human being on the moon? **That would be impossible!**

“The only way to achieve the impossible is to believe that it is possible!”

Just twenty years later, there we were. One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. Now, of course, we have landed rovers on Mars and are considering how to get human beings there as well. The impossible turned out to be possible, afterall.

Impossible thing number 4: For many years, the idea of cloning was relegated to the realm of science fiction. The idea of taking a creature – human or some other animal – and making an exact biological copy? **That would be impossible!**

“The only way to achieve the impossible is to believe that it is possible!”

The biological mechanisms were so complex, and the ethical ramifications so intense,

that many scientists avoided the area all together. Better to leave it to the realm of science fiction than open *that* door. But in 1996, a little lamb named Dolly was born – the first cloned creature. Now, if your beloved pet has died, and you have enough money (lots and LOTS of money), you can get a clone your beloved pet...The impossible turned out to be possible, afterall. And who knows what other excitement lies down THIS rabbithole...

Impossible thing number 5: We look closer to home on this one. VERY much closer to home. Last fall, some might have thought that it would be impossible for us to balance the budget in one year, to rely on pledges for a healthy majority of our operating expenses. Go cold turkey on our reliance on the endowment? Spend only what our friends and members promise to give? **That would be impossible!**

“The only way to achieve the impossible is to believe that it is possible!”

And so we believed it would be possible, and found a way – with everyone's help, to make it so. We increased our pledges by an average of 27.3% - unheard of in this economy. Next year, the budget is austere, but it is balanced, and responsible. And we *all* made it happen. The impossible turned out to be possible, afterall.

And finally, Impossible thing number 6. That Alice can slay the jabberwocky. And she did. What are we facing right now that feels utterly impossible? Recovering from the oil disaster in the Gulf? Decreasing our dependency on coal or on oil as an energy source? Peace in the Middle East? Faster than light travel? A cure for cancer?

What about closer to home? What about having Sunday services that appeal to people of all ages? Gay Marriage in Kentucky? Finding a way to balance all the different demands on your time? Getting that bully down the block to leave you alone?

What feels impossible to you right now? What is your jabberwocky? Take a moment, and quietly, to yourself, lets all say that impossible thing we feel.

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Ahh, but **that would be impossible.**

"The only way to achieve the impossible is to believe that it is possible!"

Alice did slay the jabberwocky. Her sixth impossible thing was, in the end, possible. And so is ours. Because all throughout history, there have been people saying that one thing or another was impossible, and then they were proved false. In the immortal words of Muhammad Ali:

"Impossible is nothing. Impossible is just a big word thrown around by [people] who find it easier to live in a world that they have been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary."

The impossible is only such if we believe it to be. If we believe, as Alice finally did, even impossible things become possible. May we each find our own muchness, and begin to believe.

Oh my, it's getting late. It's almost time for lunch.