



## From the Pulpit: February 6, 2022

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Luke 6:17–26

### *The Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time, VI: Posse Ipsum*

Nicholas de Cusa's favorite nickname for God is *posse ipsum* Latin for "possibility itself."

Amid the hundreds of impossibilities that seem to unfold between and within us, God as Possibility Itself seems both hopeful and illimitable. When we pray to God as Possibility Itself, we acknowledge that among the obstacles blocking our path, there is a possibility that something else might emerge. As Isaiah says the uneven ground becomes level and the rough places plain.

Nicholas de Cusa was born in 1401 in Germany, his father a boatsman on a tributary of the Rhine River. His grandparents would have lived through the bubonic plague which decimated upwards of half of Europe's population. His grandchildren if he had any, would have witnessed the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Gutenberg Press, da Vinci, Erasmus, Descartes, Galileo, Copernicus.

The perpetual whitewater of change surged in his day, just as it does in ours. Neighboring France and England were engaged in The 100 Years War. The Catholic Church was amid a triple schism, three popes claiming the papacy. And Venice was at war with the Turks.

In the midst of it all, Nicholas de Cusa went to the University of Heidelberg and became an ecclesiastical lawyer. He was destined to be barely a blip on the historical radar, one among many men in priestly garb, when he was invited on a delegation to Constantinople that changed his life.

He was there to settle some dispute but instead had visions of unity. East-meets-west. Something more than ecclesial infighting felt possible. On the boat ride home he sat with the Archbishops of Ephesus and Nicaea, trading notes

on philosophy and theology, but at the friendship-forging soul-searching level. It had a profound effect on the rest of his life.

Even in the months before his death he felt the tug, the perennial quest for the unifying presence of God, the continued search for the incomprehensible. For years he imagined the only way to find God was through the *via negativa*, the darkness, the pursuit of not-knowing, the total emptying of self that pushed deeper than articulation such that God became unnamable. But the Easter before his death, it became clear to him that "truth shouts in the streets" and that the presence of God is not elusive and cloudy, but indeed everywhere and easy to be found.



"The apex—the high point of contemplation," he says "is to see in all things nothing but possibility itself, *Posse Ipsum*." And he is not alone. In the Gospel of Luke Mother Mary says "For nothing will be impossible with God." Later Jesus whispers his mother's wisdom back to his disciples saying, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God." And so today we meet Jesus who casts an impossible vision, and calls it possible.

*He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas of Cusa: Selected spiritual writings. Paulist Press. 1997.

*Then he looked up at his disciples and said:  
“Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.  
“Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.  
“Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.  
“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they  
exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the  
Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely  
your reward is great in heaven; for that is  
what their ancestors did to the prophets.*

*“But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.  
“Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.  
“Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.*

*“Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
for that is what their ancestors did to the  
false prophets.*

**D**ibs is over Chicago.<sup>2</sup> You know what I mean right? Outdated lawn furniture to save your snow-free parking spot? Maybe you're sad to see your folding chair in the trash, your lawn chair gone. Maybe it's been years since you've had to dig your car out of a blizzard, a distant memory from your nostalgic days of living in the city. Regardless as of Friday, all your hard work shoveling snow so that you—and only you—have a parking spot is all forsaken.

It's no surprise Chicago finally decided to do away with dibs. In an age of incivility dibs just doesn't work. It's about me and mine, not us and ours. It's about self-interest over neighborliness. One dibs sign says, “Yes, Jesus Loves You, unless you steal an old lady's parking spot—smile you're on camera!” I'll leave that one to you to scrutinize theologically.

Dibs fits perfectly into our sermon series called The Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time. We're not just talking about ungentlemanly behavior, discourteousness, or

<sup>2</sup> “Dibs’ to be removed in Chicago starting Friday.” February 8, 2022. Chicago Sun Times. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2022/2/8/22924227/dibs-to-be-removed-in-chicago-starting-friday>

bad manners. We're talking about someone severing your brake line, slashing your tires, or smashing in your car windows over a snow-free parking spot.<sup>3</sup> We're talking about a flight attendant missing two teeth after an altercation with a ticketed passenger.<sup>4</sup> We're talking about the upsurge of irate citizens out in public throwing tantrums.

To take things one step further, this week someone told a local pastor that they were so fed up with the ideological divide between themselves and their neighbors that they were going to move. “I can't even stand to look at the person living next door” they said. So much for Jesus' stance on love thy neighbor. So much for at least *pretending* to love thy neighbor in front of your local pastor.

Some places are coming up with solutions. A restaurant in Cape Cod was so overwhelmed by rude customers last summer that it shut down for a “day of kindness.” A restaurant in Colorado invited a therapist to join their staff full time to help employees with industry stress.<sup>5</sup> Here in this sanctuary we are primed to take another run at the situation by exploring what Jesus says and does, to see if Jesus might lure us out of indifference, apathy, and distress.

As Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, Jesus is the Impossible Possibility for our Impossible Times. And I might add if a way through is possible, it is Nicholas De Cusa's divine Possibility Itself who will reveal The Way.

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<sup>3</sup> “Chicago's ‘Dibs’ Tradition Can Get Dirty, And Even Dangerous” February 29, 2020. WBEZ <https://www.wbez.org/stories/chicago-dibs-damage/517b4f85-651b-4fa1-8c83-bf-79cf542160>

<sup>4</sup> “Southwest Airlines passenger who allegedly knocked out flight attendant's teeth in viral altercation faces two felony charges” September 4, 2021 CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/southwest-airlines-passenger-vyvianna-quinonez-flight-attendant-teeth-felony-charges-assault/>

<sup>5</sup> “This Colorado restaurant hired a therapist to help employees with industry stress” February 12, 2022. NPR <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/12/1080354266/this-colorado-restaurant-hired-a-therapist-to-help-employees-with-industry-stres>

I love today's gospel lesson for many reasons, one of which is that Jesus has just spent the night in prayer. It is the only time in the whole gospel that Jesus spends the entire night in prayer, and so I imagine him post-all-nighter like an exhausted college student trying to make it through finals week, his immune system a little compromised, and his hunger hormone a little out of wack.

But pressure is on to make a speech. Everyone is watching. His 12 disciples are there, plus even more disciples, and then a crowd who have come from literally a hundred mile radius, all seeking the impossible possibility of healing and hope in first century Palestine.

Jesus' lecture is sometimes called the "Sermon on the Plain" because even though he spent all night praying on the mountain top, he comes down to the *plain* where the people are to preach. In Matthew he is pictured still up on the mountain top. It's called the "Sermon on the Mount." It is Matthew's version that we teach to our children: blessed are the pure in heart, the meek, the peacemakers. It doesn't quite pack the same punch as Luke.

Luke is much more straight to the point. blessed are the poor, woe to the rich. Blessed are the hungry, woe to you who are full. Maybe Jesus is just trying to boil his message down to two easy power point slides: parallel blessings and woes.

If we binge-watched the gospel of Luke, we might see it more clearly. Jesus is fine tuning his vision. Just two chapters ago, Jesus proclaimed the same message in Nazareth to the home crowd, but the abysmal depths of incivility raged even in the first century, so they almost pushed him off a cliff. They wanted easier answers from their prophets, saviors, and miracle workers.

If the people of Nazareth had been paying attention, they might have seen it coming too. Even before Jesus' first sermon there in Nazareth, where he reads from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus' blessing for the poor hung in the air. It has been his cradle song: the call of justice with which he had been raised. In the months before Jesus was born, it was his *mother's* justice-seeking melody that wove through the hill-country blessing the hungry, the lowly, and the oppressed. *She* sang that familiar tune because she borrowed language from centuries before too, from Hannah. And it's a tune even older than that, a tale as old as time, God's first whisper to us...all of this is good, let there be thriving, let there be light.

It all still feels like an impossible possibility. Illogical. Out of sorts. That blessing would come in poverty. That gift would come from weeping. That hunger could be windfall. That rejection could be a stroke of luck. But that's Luke.

Luke's is a gospel of Great Reversal, where the Giants and Jets go to the Super Bowl, the first become last and the last become first, the servants become leaders and the great among you serve. The Gospel of Luke is an **invitation** to join the impossible possibility of Jesus' vision, and participate in the soul-shifting, heart-changing, life-turning radical obedience that shakes up all expectations and turns the world around.

Theologian Catherine Keller suggests "when big shifts occur...impossibility yields to actuality...some fumble, some crack in the impossible itself discloses some other kind of possibility."<sup>6</sup> Jesus is trying to catalyze this shift, to provoke impossibility, and open wide what is possible.

We have seen it happen. The impossible becomes possible.

Maybe we feel the opposite these days. I feel the impossibility of Jesus' message when I see income inequality on the rise, or an affordable housing crisis like what Julianna Harris was just talking about, or on the news we see overt old-fashioned racism thriving, or rumors of wars churning.<sup>7</sup> We still do not know the global impact of this mired season of pandemic and disruption. History is being written.

But by last report in 2018 extreme poverty had fallen 35 percent globally, hunger by at least 25 percent, child labor was on the decline. Life expectancy on the rise. Child mortality down. Death in childbirth rare.<sup>8</sup> There is much (much, much, much, much) work to be done. Much to which we may be called. Participation is crucial. But possibility is imminent. *Posse Ipsum*. The impossible becomes possible.

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<sup>6</sup> Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement. Catherine Keller. Columbia University Press. 2014, p. 2

<sup>7</sup> <https://subsplash.com/kenilworthunionchurch/media/mi/+3h97d62>

<sup>8</sup> "23 charts and maps that show the world is getting much, much better" October 17, 2018. Dylan Matthews. <https://www.vox.com/2014/11/24/7272929/global-poverty-health-crime-literacy-good-news>

## —Prayers of the People— By The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Jesus is looking system wide. The poor. The hungry. The weeping. Jesus is calling to the rich to unhinge from the exploitative and walk the life-affirming way of Jesus. We are invited into this gospel-tinged longing for the poor to be raised up, and for human thriving—creaturely thriving—earthly thriving to be not just for some but for all. Jesus offers his thesis statement here in his ‘Sermon on the Plain’ but the rest of the Gospel of Luke is littered with stories of individual people whose lives have been changed, transformed, by this vision of human flourishing.

With Jesus I see his system-wide hope for change, and like the Gospel writers, I need something a little closer up, the Impossible Possibility at work within the more intimate workings of our everyday lives.

For me this wider vision becomes trustworthy when I see it first hand, when I notice it already unfolding in our midst. When I am with you, I come close to the Impossible Possibility for an Impossible Time unfolds here, now.

- I see it most easily up close when I talk to the chatty 19 year old in our congregation, born at 24 weeks, spent months in the NICU, and is now a towering 6 foot 5 college student. Posse Ipsum.
- I see it up close when I notice the child sitting next to you who was once only an impossible dream, a hope, a future seemingly beyond probability. Posse Ipsum.
- I see it in the momentary relief from pain you’ve felt amid the chronic illness that the doctors can treat but they cannot cure. Posse Ipsum.
- I see it when you have one good day among too many foggy impossible days. Posse Ipsum.
- I see it in the uncanny peace that you’ve told me about, that comes now-and-again amid the deep losses that you have endured. Posse Ipsum.
- I see it when you say yes to love your neighbors. Your migrant neighbor. Your politically different neighbor. Your neighbor at Sarah’s Circle. Your neighbor with the hidden ache or worry that only you know about. Posse Ipsum.
- I see it when your generosity pours forth unexpectedly, abundantly. Posse Ipsum.

Breath by breath, that spirit of the living God falls upon us, and nudges us toward the possibility of the impossible. May such a vision unfold.

Blessed are you Crown of Winter, you who whisper promises across the blistering cold. You grant gifts of stillness and snowflake without, fireplace within, shelter above, and your own near presence alongside.

Thank you for gifts beyond counting: For keeping us safe from the elements, from vectors of illness, from falling on the ice, from want, from hunger, from boredom, from loneliness.

In days like these we become aware as never before how much our lives depend on the courage, industry, honesty, and integrity of our fellow citizens. Thank you for the tireless compassion of our medical professionals, the shrewd science of the farmers who provide our food, the efficiency of the vendors who deliver to us the things we need to flourish. May we be mindful of their needs, grateful for their loyalty, and faithful in our responsibilities to them.

Divine Liberator, we pray for peace in Eastern Europe. Protect the innocent. Remove aggression from the heart of the imperialist, and grant crafty diplomacy to the negotiators. The Hebrew prophets declared that you shall judge between many peoples, and arbitrate between strong nations far away, so that erstwhile warriors shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, so that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Source of Every Mercy, some of our friends face dire straits. Gather them in to your gracious safekeeping. We pray for our friend Jeanne—faithful chorister, beloved friend, dedicated teacher, lifelong learner. We barely know what plea to pray at an hour such as this, but you know what is right for her life. If a sad farewell be imminent, we will weep our tears but also choir the proper praise for all in her, which was good, and kind, and faithful and gentle. We are grateful that our various paths crossed hers for a time, each in our several ways.

There are others among us who need an extraordinary measure of your grace just now. Sometimes it seems like there are a lot of others. We pray for our friend David facing serious illness. Inspire his physicians to discover a therapy that will work for him.

All these thanksgivings and petitions we offer to the throne of grace in the strong name of Jesus our Lord, who taught us to pray...Our Father... Amen.