

Betsey Moe
Sermon 4.19.09
“Net Results”

John 21:1-14

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will go with you.” They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” 6He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. 7That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. 8But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. 9When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” 11So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. 13Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. 16I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, 17and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. 18I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, 21to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Many of you know that this last week was whirl of activity for my husband and me. He was a part of a musical summit sponsored by Google and YouTube that culminated in a symphony concert in Carnegie Hall on Wednesday night. Eric and I have long engaged in discussions about the parallels between symphonies and the Church. Here are these two institutions built, in large part, on tradition. Both believe in their own relevance and value, but both struggle to assert that relevance. In both circles, there is fear about gradual decline: their buildings are expensive to maintain, while on the whole, membership is down; attracting a younger crowd is an uphill battle; and both institutions have been called “elitist” at times. And so when I found myself last week witnessing a major attempt to “reinvent” the symphony orchestra, my eyes were wide open, hoping to gain insight for my work in the church.

Perhaps the greatest privilege of the past week was to see someone's grand idea lived out – to see what happens when people use their imaginations for the sake of their art or the company they work for and move forward to carry out their wildest ideas.

From what I could tell, the key to this project's success was the ability of people all along the way to say, "What if?" rather than, "What now?"

First, the internet giant Google asked, "What if we created an orchestra of professional and amateur musicians from all over the world? What if they could audition online – on YouTube? What if the online community could vote for the best musicians? What if we could fly them all to New York to play together under a famous conductor? Enter Michael Tilson Thomas of the San Francisco Symphony, and the "What ifs" continued. What if we were to rent the most famous venue in New York City for the performance? What if we hired music mentors for every section? What if we were to use multiple forms of media throughout the whole concert?

Then, the "What ifs" began in our family. At the time when Eric heard about the project, it was early January; the Christmas gigs had come and gone. There were several times when he quite literally asked, "What now?" But even though the idea of an online symphony audition for a Carnegie Hall concert sounded far-fetched, he decided to ask, "What if?" What if I were to buy a webcam and try to record myself? After Eric won, it was my turn to ask, "What if I were to go along?"

Witnessing an experiment like this one – a gutsy, expansive experiment – made me reflect on how we serve Jesus in the church. I started to wonder, *How often does the church ask, "What if?" How often do we as a church engage in this kind of dreaming not limited by fear of failure?* After Pastor Ken's Easter sermon last week about the victory already being won in Christ, and how our lives are not lived in vain when lived for Christ, I think the next question to ask is, *How is the church living for Christ?*

It is certainly easy to get into our routines and roles in the church. We like order and predictability. But the risen Christ is always calling us to think outside the box when it comes to doing ministry. The apostle Paul, himself transformed after an encounter with the risen Christ, understood this call in the core of his being. We get a sense of it in his letter to the Ephesians, when he speaks of the "breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of Christ. Paul desperately wants the church to comprehend the power of God – the One who is "able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." Oh, what the church could be – oh, how the church could love, Paul is convinced – if only we started to grasp the power of our God.

This mindset of possibility based on the power of God – of abundant existence -- is exactly what the disciples learned at the Sea of Tiberias. Their teacher and friend had died and risen from the dead, and they had seen him themselves in risen form – twice. The disciples are sitting around, and I can imagine them saying, "What now? Jesus is risen, but what does that mean for us?" So Peter, going with something comfortable, something he knows how to do, says, "I'm going fishing." The others, some of whom were also fisherman by trade, say, "We'll go too." And

after a whole night of trying, they see no results. If this story were depicted in a cartoon, Peter would have lifted the net out of the water only to find a boot and a tire all tangled up.

But then they hear a voice. A man is calling to them from the shore, telling them to try something a little different – to let down their nets on the right side of the boat – and when they do, their nets are so weighed down that they can barely haul in the fish. And here is the point of recognition in this story: only Jesus could be responsible for such abundance. Like the wine at the wedding, like the leftover basketfuls of fish and bread, there were more fish than they knew what to do with.

This episode is not about belief – Thomas has already touched Jesus’ nail holes. This episode is about what the disciples are going to do with this new reality of death being conquered. Will they go back to living a hum-drum existence, or will they follow the risen Christ into new territory, a territory where God will do abundantly far more than all they could ask or imagine? Will they continue to ask, “What now?,” or will they start asking, “What if?”

This is the first miracle in the gospel of John that is done *for* the disciples. Usually, they have been observers of Jesus healing sight, providing food, showing uncommon love to other people. But this time, the miracle is for their sake – to remind them to listen and to remind them that the one calling them was able to do far more abundantly than all they could ask or imagine.

Perhaps the greatest limitation we face in the church is our tendency to forget the nature of the God we serve. And because of our forgetfulness, we are always on the brink of losing our ability to hear that voice from the shore and respond.

What kind of dreams do you have as you think about being the Church? Things that you’ve thought up that seem like they come from God, but they’re just too outlandish, too difficult? What would you dare to try if failure were not a threat? *What if* you were to launch a mission trip to Sudan, to Zimbabwe? *What if* you were to start a new Bible Study group in your neighborhood or workplace? *What if* you were to start mentoring a teenager “at risk,” or to start a program which trained and paired mentors with teenagers? What if you were to write a book about your spiritual journey and give it to you kids? (This is how The Shack started.) And then, *what if* you were to share that idea with some others, no matter how impossible it sounded? Listening for the call of Christ is not just in the hands of the church governing board, the Session. The risen Christ has appeared to all of us and is calling us out.

Or, maybe you are plugged in or would like to plug into one of the existing ministries in the church; maybe you would like to serve as an usher or greeter or reader or teacher or fellowship event organizer – here especially your sensitivity to the voice of Christ, your imagination in carrying out your task, is needed. What if, as a greeter, I committed to learning three new names each time I served? What if – and here’s a real-life idea that some of our teachers tried last year – what if in sixth grade Sunday School, we have the kids act out the last Supper, with a full seder menu and costumes? The Church filled with people daring to say, “What if?” is a faithful Church – trusting in the power of a God able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

The concert last Wednesday was thrilling. From this audience member's perspective, all involved cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and the nets were filled to overflowing. Nearly 100 musicians from 30 countries sat on the stage at Carnegie Hall, playing with the energy of young, eager musicians and the skill and sensitivity of seasoned players. Images set to rhythm were projected onto the walls and ceiling while the music was played, and video introductions of various symphony members were presented between songs. Musicians like Eric grew immeasurably through this process by learning to use technology for collaboration and musical communication. Because of online introductions, online lessons and master classes, and online logistical planning, the musicians were able to come from every corner of the world and with only three days of rehearsals, put on a dazzling concert. Will symphony orchestras be changed forever because of this project? Only time will tell. One thing is for certain: all those who said, "What if?" – from the Google execs to the conductors and composers to musicians like Eric – have been pushed to a new level of performance.

There are many people here at Hamblen that use "holy creativity" and ask the "What if?" question. A great example going on right now is the dreaming that the Vacation Bible School committee has been doing. Now, it is not as if they have been letting down their nets year after year without results. No, in recent years they have maxed out the facilities here – and after last year, the consensus was, "We simply cannot grow any more." In thinking about growing, they let down their net and came up with a shoe and a tire. But after some conversations about Children's Ministry last fall, a few of them were sensing that Jesus was calling to them from the shore to try something new, and they started talking about it. What if we were to offer two identical sessions – one in the morning, and one in the afternoon – to double our space? And what if we were to bring in teachers and volunteers to work with kids with special needs? What if we could become a church known for its inclusivity? What if? Is it scary to try something new? Of course! The old way was comfortable, and, for the most part, it was working fine. Might it fail? Yes! That could be said for any new idea. But in listening for the voice from the shore, at the very least, this group will be different.

We cannot underestimate the power of dreaming – of actively listening together for the voice of Christ calling us to try something new. Companies like Google and symphony orchestras dream and imagine and vision to survive; they know that they *will* die if they are not re-imagining and re-inventing themselves. We as the Church dream or listen for Christ not because Christianity will die if we don't do something – God's got the end of history already wrapped up – but because by nature the risen Christ we serve brings abundance and life. Along the way, we will fail, but even perceived failure can be an opportunity for growth. Because failure will not have the last word, we dare to listen for and follow the risen Christ into new territory. We truly have nothing to lose.

Besides, why should we let Google have all the fun?

Now, to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.