



“Christ’s Vision”

Text: John 21:1-14

a sermon by the Rev. Wendy VanderZee, guest preacher

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The movie *Braveheart* has been on network or cable television many times since it came out in 1995, so you likely have seen it. It’s about the Scots hero, William Wallace, who led his people in a revolt against a tyrannical English king. The film’s great power for me was how it portrayed the ability of Wallace, played by Mel Gibson, to inspire his countrymen to face an enemy who vastly outnumbered them. In the end, Wallace was captured, and it appeared that the vision of Scottish liberty would die with him. But among the men who witnessed Wallace’s defiant defense of freedom even as he was being tortured and executed was the nobleman Robert Bruce. Overcoming his own internal demons and a domineering father, Bruce picked up the mantle of leadership and led his homeland to victory against English tyranny. Without the vision and courage of Wallace and his ability to incite a shared vision in his fellow Scots, freedom would never have been gained.

Vision is the ability to understand the circumstances and events of the present day in light of one’s hopes and dreams for the future, and to somehow bring the two together. When people truly share a vision, they are connected, bound together by a common aspiration.

Personal visions derive their power from an individual’s passion for what can be achieved and the wherewithal to know how to achieve it in the right set of circumstances. Shared visions derive their power from a shared commitment and a strong belief in their leadership.

Today, vision is a familiar concept in the corporate and non-profit world, and many organizational leaders have jumped on the vision bandwagon. The term is used so frequently today as to lose much of its gloss. But few will argue with the fact that for an organization to flourish, it is essential to have a vision. In its simplest level, a vision is the answer to the question, “what do we want to create together?”

This morning I want to talk to you about what it means for the Church of Jesus Christ to have vision. Our corporate consultant will be none other than the Apostle John, perhaps the greatest visionary of early Christianity, maybe of all Christendom. John, with this story, is offering a picture of the church's beginnings as he understood Jesus would have envisioned them to be. It is meant to convey a picture of the kind of community Jesus had in mind for his followers to build. Vision asks the question the Gospel writer, John, was essentially asking the church of his time, and, by implication all of us, "what do we want to create together?"

The story begins with seven of Jesus' disciples, led by Peter, setting out in boats on the Sea of Galilee to go fishing. Right off the bat we seem to have a problem. Think about it. If these disciples have seen the risen Lord and have received their mission from him - as the previous chapter seems to imply - why are they now wasting their time fishing? How can they possibly return to their previous occupation as fishermen knowing what they now know: that Jesus has been raised from death, and has given them a message to share with the rest of the world? Talk about lack of vision! Perhaps all the events of the previous weeks have just been too much for them. For the sake of their sanity they had to return to something familiar and routine and predictable. Life goes on, after all; people still have to make a living and they need to eat!

In any case, it is important to remember that we have the advantage of having 2,000 years of history and the Biblical record to tell us what happened next. We know that beginning with Peter and John and continuing with Paul and the other apostles, the message of the saving work of Jesus Christ soon moves out of Jerusalem into Asia Minor and eventually Rome; later to Europe, Africa, Asia and the world. The disciples on that early Galilee morning did not have the big picture and could probably have cared less. Through no fault of their own, sitting in those boats on the Sea of Galilee, they lacked vision. Simon Peter said to the other disciples, "I'm going fishing." And they responded, "We're going with you!" Little did they know that their little fishing jaunt symbolized a vastly greater enterprise.

The disciples are on a boat in the Sea of Galilee early one morning. They had been fishing all night but have nothing to show for it. It's not difficult to imagine that they were tired and frustrated. They were also probably pretty confused. They had seen Jesus, although, at first, they didn't recognize him. He showed them his hands, feet and side, and they believed. But what did it all mean? His physical appearance was different. He came and went like an apparition. Things weren't the same as they were in the good old days when they hardly left Jesus' side. He promised them that before too long his Spirit would come to be their guide and companion. But when, and what were they supposed to do until then. All they knew was that without him they felt lost and adrift.

Let's stop a minute to think about how the disciples' situation might reflect our own predicament. Do our lives sometimes seem routine and aimless? Does our spiritual life lack direction? What is our church's vision as we sit here in April 2024?

We may come to worship fairly regularly, give financially to the church, and attend committee meetings. But do you know what the church's vision is? Do you share in

the vision? Do we, like the disciples, hearken back or even long for the way things used to be 5, 10, or 20 years ago? Do you believe the future of the church will take care of itself; or that it's left to the next generation? More often than we are willing to admit, like the disciples, we too find ourselves coming into harbor with not much to show for our efforts. Do we find ourselves looking backwards or forwards or do we just drift along with the waves?

The disciples try again the next morning; but now a stranger is on the shore. "Having any luck, fellows?" shouts the newcomer. They do not have to respond. The answer is obvious.

"Then throw the net over to the other side of the boat and you will find some fish."

The men follow the stranger's advice, and sure enough, they snare a monstrous catch of fish.

What happened here is customarily interpreted as a miracle. It certainly demonstrates the power of Christ to make things happen. But in reality, what happened that morning along the shore is an example what sometimes can actually happen on the Sea of Galilee. One modern day pilgrim to the Holy Land describes how he saw two men fishing on the shores of the great lake:

"One man waded out from the shore and was casting a bell net into the water. But time after time the net came up empty. It was a beautiful sight to see him casting. Each time the neatly folded net belled out in the air and fell so precisely on the water that the small lead weights hit the lake at the same moment making a thin circular splash. While he was waiting for another cast, Abdul shouted to him from the bank to fling to the left, which he did. This time he was successful. They drew up the net and we could see the fish struggling in it. It happens frequently that the man with the hand-net must rely on the advice of someone on the shore, who tells him to cast either to the left or the right, because in the clear water he can often see a shoal of fish invisible to the man on the shore."

And so, John, the apostle, uses an unusual, but not unheard-of circumstance to make a vivid point. Jesus was acting as a guide to his fishermen friends. From his vantage point on shore, he could see the possibilities for a great catch that they could not see. With Jesus as guide, as visionary, the disciples accomplish their mission - a successful day out on the lake.

The lesson that John is teaching becomes more clear. Christ is visionary guide for his disciples and by extension for the Church. Without Christ as our guide and pilot we are powerless and our ministry fruitless. Sometimes what it takes for our mission to succeed is to take direction from the One whose vantage-point and perspective transcends our parochial outlook, giving new focus to our individual and collective ministries. Is it the proverbial inability of not seeing the forest through the trees?

The disciples obeyed the Lord's direction and flung their nets to the other side of the boat. So too, we will be prepared to take the risk of changing directions; reconsider old patterns of thinking and acting; take a long hard look at how we treat one another and the stranger, and see how it conforms to Christ's vision and goal.

Paul talks about the Church as the Body of Christ, and all of us are members of it. That means that we all share and participate in Christ's vision for the Church. The church's vision is a composite, a consolidation of all our creativity and imagination, our dreams and hopes for the Church. We will certainly not always agree. But if we are attuned to the vision of Christ and are intent on following Christ's lead, God will find a way for each of our visions to find some measure of fulfillment.

So, what then is Christ's vision for the Church? How are we to know it? The Gospel lesson offers, I think, two goals for the Church and they are symbolized in the spectacular catch of fish.

In verse 11 we read that Simon Peter went to the boat and dragged the net ashore full of fish - 153 in all! One wonders why the writer, John, felt it necessary to tell us the precise number of fish that were caught. It seems likely that the number, 153, held some symbolic importance for the author. It has been hypothesized that at the time of this writing there were precisely 153 species of fish known to humankind.

John is using a powerful symbol to demonstrate that the Lord's vision for the Church is that human beings of all races, tongues, and nations, shall know his love and redeeming grace. There shall be no distinction of social class, race, gender, age, sexual preference, or identity. The only distinguishing mark is faith in Jesus the Christ and his message, and to his vision of an inclusive community.

The net that Simon Peter dragged ashore was so full of fish and yet the net remained untruncated, the net was big enough and strong enough to hold them all.

Let us come to know and understand the impact that the Christian faith has on other nations and cultures. And let us participate in whatever way we can in other peoples' visions for the Church remembering Christ's own prayer to God for the Church recorded in John 17, "the glory you have given me, I have given them, that they all may be one, as we are one."

Secondly and finally, Christ's vision for the Church becomes even clearer when we recall what happened after the catch was brought in to shore. Jesus invited his disciples to breakfast - to share in the fellowship of a meal together much like he did on that memorable occasion in the Upper Room before his death.

Christ's vision for the Church is that it is not only an inclusive community, but also a community that comes together to nourish and nurture one another. Let the church be a "gathered" community, coming together for prayer, worship, fellowship, communion, feasting and celebration. Zoom technology has its place, but we also need to be present with one another for growth and nurture.

And so, let us celebrate all of what makes the Church of Jesus Christ, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and this particular congregation and every person in it, unique and chosen and important and beloved. Let us look for ways that we can spread that beacon of Christ's liberating light and love in this community and beyond. But let us also celebrate the even broader vision that Christ has for his body. May Jesus' prayer to God on our behalf be also our prayer for the world-wide Church, "that they may all be one". Amen.