

A Sermon by Claudia C. Schmitt, Senior Pastor  
Wheat Ridge Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
6310 West 29<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Wheat Ridge, Colorado 80214  
303-238-6271  
www.wheatridgeucc.org

August 8, 2015

## Imagining the Possible

Read Mark 6:1-13

Five years ago David and I took a road trip to various national parks. Death Valley was on our itinerary and it happened that we would be driving through a town in California called Big Pine. It is a little town along the eastern side Sierra Nevada range on highway 395 about 250 miles northeast of Los Angeles. I spent a few of my high school years there. The road is mostly used by the Southern California travelers on their way to ski at Mammoth Mountain.

When I lived there 40 years ago the population of Big Pine was about 500. There was one motel at one end of the town, a school house for kids from kindergarten through high school, a couple of restaurants, a gas station, grocery store, and no stop light. On our travels we decided to see Big Pine and spend the night. In today's world of population growth, technology, and property development, I wondered how it had changed. When we arrived, I had a twilight zone moment. Big Pine hadn't changed a bit, except maybe it was even a little shabbier and more rundown than I remembered. It was eerie. The school was painted the same color as 40 years ago. The little Italian restaurant was exactly as I remembered it.

David and I went to the solitary, small grocery store I had frequented as a child when I wanted to purchase items—mostly candy. We struck up a conversation with the grocery clerk, who was also the owner, who had spent his entire life in Big Pine. He even remembered my sister. Throughout the conversation he said repeatedly, "Oh, nothing ever changes in Big Pine. It'll always be the same." This was interesting to me, because I felt radically different from that young girl who used to live there. But Big Pine was the same.

When was the last time you felt changed? When was the last time you imagined something different or better or more meaningful for your life?

The Gospel of Mark's recounting of Jesus returning home to Nazareth is a remarkable and interesting story. It, too, is a story about a place and a people who hadn't changed, couldn't change, and in fact actively resisted seeing themselves in a new way. Nazareth was a small, agricultural Jewish village of probably not more than 500 residents. This was the town where both Mary and Joseph were born. People knew one another. They all lived, prayed, and studied in the Jewish tradition. Nazareth was isolated and with no trade routes, and so they probably didn't encounter many visitors or experience much influence from outsiders. They did, however, remember Jesus as the carpenter. His hands, once strong and rough with the heavy labor of working, have now become powerful instruments of healing and compassion. In the short time since Jesus left he has been through an implausible transformation.

He has been baptized by John the Baptist, spent forty days in the wilderness facing and confronting his own temptations and inner darkness, and he has come into the realization and acceptance of who he is as a Messiah and Savior and what it is going to cost him. He has been healing lepers and performing exorcisms, he is imparting wisdom in creative ways as he teaches in parables, and people's lives are being utterly transformed. He is so astounding that people seek him out. He heals Jairus's little daughter by simply holding her hand. A woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years merely touches his cloak and her bleeding stop and she knows her body has been made

whole. From the ideas that come out of his mouth to each person he touches, there is unfathomable spiritual power—power that is miraculous, authentic, and original. Jesus has been spectacularly effective. Then, for some reason, he decides to go home.

It must have been quite a surprise for the people of Nazareth to see this carpenter, along with his entourage walking into their little town of Nazareth. The town’s people undoubtedly have heard some unbelievable rumors and stories about this man from Nazareth, one of their own, who could cast out demons and heal lepers, but it would have been pretty hard to believe.

Now you would think the hometown crowd would have been happy to see him, or least interested to hear of some news of the nearby villages or learn about his amazing journey, but something very different unfolds. Instead of a hearty welcome home there is suspicion. There is whispering. As he begins to teach in the synagogue, he teaches with a spiritual wisdom and perception that both astonishes the people and frightens them. Instead of embracing their hometown boy they begin to wag their tongues and tear him down. Who does he think he is? He’s a carpenter! He’s the son of Mary! Oh, sure, remember that nutty story about his birth? No wonder he has a messiah complex! Do you think he’s crazy? What kind of person has followers? What if he stays? I wonder what he wants?

The hometown crowd remembers who he was but cannot imagine or embrace who he has become. Mark tells us that he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

One of the unique qualities of Jesus’ ministry is that he had the ability to imagine how people could be, how society could be. He had the gift of imagining the possible. Jesus is one who is able to imagine what is possible for a woman at the well, who has been ridden with shame, and he offers her living water which she accepts, and she is transformed. Jesus imagines a new paradigm for human relationships, one in which the outcast and the disenfranchised are loved and accepted and treated as equals. Jesus imagines what a different kind of relationship with God can be, one rooted in love and compassion instead of a legalistic prescribed dogma. Wherever Jesus journeyed he imagined different responses and outcomes from the usual societal customs, and he offered imaginative insights into the Jewish scriptures. When there are those who would throw

stones at a woman caught in adultery, Jesus presents a new understanding, challenging those to reflect on their own sins rather than blindly following the law of Moses.

But when Jesus comes home he can do almost nothing. In the scripture, Jesus is impacted by the unbelief of the community and he is limited by what he can accomplish.

Many of you may have heard of the controversial experiment conducted by Iowa school teacher, Jane Elliot, back in 1968. This was the experiment where the blue-eyed and brown-eyed kids were artificially assigned roles as either superior or inferior students and then they were treated accordingly. The results were astounding. Those who were deemed superior became arrogant, bossy, and otherwise disdainful of their “inferior” classmates. Their grades on simple tests were better, and they completed mathematical and reading tasks that had seemed outside their ability before. The “inferior” classmates were also transformed—into timid and subservient children who scored poorer on tests, and even during recess isolated themselves, including those who had previously been dominant in the class. These children’s academic performance suffered, even with tasks that had seemed simple before.

The point is that who and what we imagine we are has a profound impact on who we become. How we imagine others has a profound impact on who they are and who they can become. Do you carry unbelief around with you? The gospel and the Spirit of Christ call us to develop a perspective of imagining the possible!

Amy Purdy, a championship adaptive snow boarder, has an inspiring story of the power of imagination. In a talk on called “Living beyond Limits” she tells of her ordeal in contracting bacterial meningitis and its devastating impact. She writes, “I went home from work early one day with what I thought was the flu, and less than 24 hours later I was in the hospital on life support with less than a two percent chance of living . . . . Over the course of two and a half months I lost my spleen, my kidneys, the hearing in my left ear and both of my legs below the knee.” Amy talks about how broken and utterly lost she felt. She goes on to write, “But I knew that in order to move forward, I had to let go of the old Amy and learn to embrace the new Amy.” She says, “Eleven years ago, when I lost my legs, I had no idea what to expect. But if you ask me today whether I

would ever want to change my situation, I would have to say no, because my legs haven't disabled me. If anything, they've *enabled* me. They've forced me to rely on my imagination and to believe in the possibilities . . . and that's why I believe that our imaginations can be used as tools for breaking through borders. It's believing in those dreams and facing our fears head-on that allows us to live our lives beyond our limits." Amy closes her talk with the challenge, "that maybe instead of looking at our challenges and our limitations as something negative or bad, we can begin to look at them as blessings, magnificent gifts that can be used to ignite our imaginations and help us go further than we ever knew we could go."

Since then Amy has cofounded a nonprofit organization for youth and young adults with physical disabilities so they can get involved with action sports. She has traveled to South Africa where she has helped to put shoes on thousands of children's feet so they could attend school. In February of 2011 she won two back-to-back World Cup gold medals which made her the highest ranked adaptive female snowboarder in the world. Amy was able to imagine what is possible for her life beyond her disability.

In the Gospel story of Jesus returning home, he is rejected by his own community. He is angry and frustrated and amazed at their inability to believe, yet he is undaunted and, in fact, it is as though it is has mobilized Jesus and his disciples. The rejection and failure in Jesus' hometown has drawn them all closer to their mission and their possibility. They push off from Nazareth, and in the very next passage Jesus has commissioned and empowered the twelve disciples to travel to new places in order to heal and cast out demons.

Preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick observed that most people saw the disciples for who they were;

Jesus saw them for who they *could* be. Jesus sees who they can *become*, and they are then able to see themselves in a new way. Jesus tells the disciples to take nothing for their journey and they go out into the villages with no bread, no bag, no money in their belts. The truth is they have everything they need, they know themselves to be larger than they thought, they know themselves capable of bringing healing to others in the name of Christ, and they know themselves as individuals who have everything they need and they know the truth of the good news.

Today, Jesus Christ is still in the business of seeing us not simply as we are, but for what we *can* be. Isn't that a wonderful thing to know?

Just the other day we had some little kids climbing precariously on the back stairs that lead up to roof. I got all wound up and ran over the window and started shaking my finger at them. It was a typical hostile and anxious response to some bothersome kids and a complete failure of my own imagination of who I am as a disciple of Christ. I could have gone outside and talked to them. I could have brought them cookies. I could have invited them to Sunday school. In some ways I severed an opportunity for relationship before I could even establish one.

The gospel of Jesus Christ invites us into a world of imagining what is possible. It invites us to move from rejection to empowerment, it invites us to move from who we are into who we are called to become, it invites us to say yes to the unknown because in every step into the unknown, God goes with us. We are today's disciples, and we are called to imagine ourselves in the way that Christ imagines we can be. We are called to imagine what our church can be. The gospel invites us to imagine the kingdom of God is possible and viable right here right now.

What is your imagination calling to you?