“And looking at them Jesus said to them, ‘With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” (Matthew 19:26, New American Standard Bible)

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew has taken on special meaning in my wife’s family in 2012, specifically that “with God all things are possible.”

Sheila’s niece Vicki entered East Jefferson Hospital this past January 3rd. She was 22 weeks pregnant and in premature labor. Vicki’s last pregnancy ended in a miscarriage and the chances were good it would happen again.

But this time Vicki was in a race to stretch the clock because the neonatologists would not provide intensive care for the premature baby at 22 weeks, but would at 24 weeks because viability is considered to be around 24 weeks.

Through the power of today’s medicine and praying “but with God all things are possible,” Vicki made it past week 22 and week 23.

On January 17, during the 24th week, Baby Charlotte was born at 1½ pounds and 12¼ inches long. While she made it to week 24 and was in the neonatal intensive care unit her chance of survival was just 50% ... “but with God all things are possible.”

Shortly after Baby Charlotte was born heart complications set in because her ductus arteriosus failed to close after birth. Wanting to avoid surgery her doctors first tried medication. It worked! Surgery was avoided and Baby Charlotte was gaining strength.

For the Judge family, Baby Charlotte’s journey was definitely a roller-coaster ... “but with God all things are possible.”

Then in mid-March the bottom fell out and Baby Charlotte had neonatal sepsis and wasn’t expected to live the weekend. But she did!

The roller-coaster continued but the ups were higher and the downs not as low until on June 20, 155 days after she was born, Baby Charlotte got to go home and meet her big sister.

My telling of this story does not do justice to the 5 month journey Baby Charlotte and the Judge family took from January 17 to June 20. But the point of the story is simple: with God all things are possible.

Our journey together began five years ago. For me my faith that with God all things are possible has been reaffirmed and strengthened in that time.

I would like to expand on that during my time this morning. I’d like to explore the path we’ve taken these last five years through the lens of discovery, reflection & vocation – what we’ve experienced, what does it mean, and what is our path forward.

What we’ve experienced can be summed up with four key indicators: financial bottom-line, financial ratio, enrollment, and retention. The two financial indicators are tracked by and critical to the Higher Learning Commission and the US Department of Education, while the two enrollment indicators are tracked by and critical to the Higher Learning Commission.
When we began this journey, we started with a financial bottom-line of a $3.8 million deficit or decrease in unrestricted net assets. When you consider that first year we had $9.1 million in revenues we had a 42% net loss. That first year our financial ratio was 0.6. That ratio ranges from -1 to a +3, but to be in “good standing” you need a 1.5.

That first fall our enrollment was 537, which represented the lowest enrollment at Bethany since the 1960’s, and our freshmen-to-sophomore retention was 53%, the second lowest over the previous 20 years.

Now jumping ahead five years – and as we all know too well these last five years we have experienced challenges, opportunities, stress, tears, and joy.

While still preliminary our June 30 financial statements indicate our change in unrestricted net assets, or financial bottom-line, is an increase of $565,000. When you consider our unrestricted revenues totaled approximately $11.3 million that means our net income margin is about 5%. This significantly drives our preliminary financial ratio to a projected 1.4

Even more significant, this would be the second largest increase in unrestricted net assets Bethany has generated in 20 years. Our challenge now is to take the next step and make this happen internally by getting our operations to totally sit on its own bottom.

This fall we are projecting an enrollment of about 610 and our preliminary freshmen-to-sophomore retention is 63%. Yes, enrollment is down from last year, but our five-year trend is still up and we are making small steps forward on retention. I’ll mention more about enrollment and retention in a few minutes.

In addition to the positive steps forward we have made in these four key indicators, we can also feel proud that during the last five years we were reaffirmed in our accreditations with the Higher Learning Commission, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, and the National Schools of Music; and we were successful in securing first time accreditation with the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education.

We invested over $7.5 million in new or enhanced academic, athletic, and residential facilities which includes new laboratories for the sciences, new physical fitness center, artificial turf for football/soccer, new track, and a new apartment-style residence hall.

We launched international partnerships with Harlaxton College in England and Karlstad and Linnaeus Universities in Sweden.

We are piloting this year Bethany Pathway, our re-imagined core curriculum based on our four missional directions of discovery, reflection & vocation, servant leadership, global citizenship, and sustainable living.

We are finalizing an athletic plan based on a vision of excellence that is both on-and-off the field.

We continue to make significant progress in our Engage the Future comprehensive campaign which we publicly announced last fall. We have secured in gifts and pledges $14.3 million – and that puts us ahead of pace to reach the base goal of $20 million and slightly behind pace on the stretch goal of $25 million. The campaign is scheduled to conclude on December 30, 2014.

This list is not exhaustive of all the good things that you have done over the last five years. And I cannot thank you enough for the hard work and sacrifices you have put forth to take these steps forward!

**So, what does this mean?**
Like the Judge family, I have learned that with God all things are possible, but these last five years have also shown me the power of the Bethany community to do good. When we collectively put ourselves to a task, we succeed. When we are One Bethany, all things are possible.

As we begin the 2012-2013 academic year, let that be our theme, or north star: As One Bethany all things are possible.

Now, what is our path forward?

As I reflect over the last five years and listen to the call of the future, I know we have done much, but we have much yet to do. This summer President’s Council spent considerable time talking about our challenges. We also discussed our renaissance plan, Call to Action, and concluded that Call to Action needs to be refocused on the vital and feasible pivotal goals that when leveraged will make a difference in responding to those challenges.

We identified six critical challenges and six pivotal goals for the year ahead.

#1. Two years ago recognizing the importance of retention in growing enrollment and our historically poor record of retention we applied to and participated in the Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year©. We are now ready to launch the plan generated from that effort with a renewed first-year experience – as One Bethany success is possible in retaining 70% of this fall’s freshmen.

#2. Looking more closely at our enrollment, our profile is about 66% athletes, 17% musicians, and 17% others (meaning non-athletes and non-musicians). By contrast, in the early 1980’s, our profile was about 40% athletes, 24% musicians, and 36% others. Ironically, the raw number of athletes has increased only by about 80, attributable to the expansion of women’s athletics and new sports, while our total enrollment has dropped 200. That means our best opportunity for enrollment growth is with non-athletes.

Interestingly, over the last four years we have admitted on average 382 non-athlete freshmen. However, two years ago we enrolled 25% and last year 12%. Contrast that with our yield on freshmen athletes of 55-60%.

Our challenge in recruiting non-athletes is simply the challenge of closing the sale – as One Bethany success is possible in recruiting 125 freshmen non-athletes for fall 2013.

#3. A further analysis of our historical enrollment reveals we recruit one market segment, 18-24 year olds. Our future lies in new markets and new programs. To begin, we must expand our high school dual credit program and successfully launch Bethany online – as One Bethany success is possible in expanding into new markets and/or launching new programs generating 100 students for fall 2013.

#4. As enrollment declined over 25 years, our curriculum became “all things for all people” resulting in the homogenization of our academic programs. Today we look like everyone else. Further, we set our pricing to be competitive with the public universities’ pricing. Yet no private college can successfully compete with a public university on pricing alone. Even more significantly that pricing decision commoditized Bethany with the publics.

Pricing, commoditization, and homogenization have cumulatively and significantly devalued our brand. We must be heard in a noisy marketplace and we must get our story out there – as One Bethany success is possible in strengthening our brand with a value proposition that proves our students succeed at an affordable price.

#5. For 18 months a cross-campus work group imagineered a new curricular and co-curricular model for Bethany. Eventually they came to base the model on the market discipline of the “best total experience.” We have since named this model Bethany Pathway and we have placed great hope that this will be our game-changer – as One Bethany success is possible in living Bethany Pathway while qualitatively renewing each component of the Bethany experience.
#6. The final challenge is the culture or environment at Bethany. Last January in a Fast Company magazine article titled “Culture eats strategy for lunch,” author Shawn Parr wrote, “Culture is the environment in which your strategy and your brand thrives or dies a slow death.” The other five challenges begin to define and shape our strategy and our brand – as One Bethany success is possible in creating a culture that allows our strategy and our brand to thrive.

Earlier I mentioned that these last five years have shown me the power of the Bethany community to do good. To paraphrase former US president Bill Clinton, who really said it best, "There is nothing wrong with Bethany that cannot be cured by what is right with Bethany." As One Bethany all things are possible.

Let’s have a great year. Let’s work hard and have fun.

Go Swedes. Serve the Lord.