

“GREATER WORKS THAN THESE”

1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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The passage we just read from the Gospel of John is the standard Gospel lesson for funerals in the United Methodist Church. “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. . .I go to prepare a place for you. . .I will come again will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3). One can hardly imagine words that are more fitting and reassuring on the occasion of a Christian funeral.

However, it’s worth noting that when Jesus first speaks these words, he’s not officiating at a funeral. No one in his immediate circle has died; but, still, the disciples are grieving. They are experiencing a type of grief many of us know all too well. We call it “anticipatory grief” – the sadness we feel when someone we love is in the process of dying, perhaps saying a long goodbye, and we anticipate losing that person and his or her companionship. The truth is that anticipatory grief can be more pronounced and painful than the grief we experience when our loved one finally dies.

According to John, this is the type of grief that Jesus’ disciples feel when he speaks to them after the Last Supper. Jesus informs them that his “hour” has come, that he is about to die, that he will be leaving them behind to return to his Father. Of course, the disciples grieve for Jesus because he is losing his life prematurely; but they also grieve for themselves because they are losing Jesus and will soon feel the void of his absence. All their power has come from their proximity to Jesus. Now that he is going away, they’re asking, “What is to become of us?” Their grief is compounded by anxiety and fear.

Jesus responds to the disciples’ anguish by making a series of promises. The first promise is that his followers will have a future abiding place with God where Jesus himself will be present. This is the promise we customarily hear at Christian funerals. The second promise is that of a sure and clear path to God. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6) . . . “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” Jesus says (v. 9). According to John’s Gospel, if you and I are looking for a way to make contact with the invisible God, or if we simply want to know what God is like, we need look no further than Jesus. And then the third promise is the promise of power – the power not only to sustain the believing community in the world, but also to enable his followers to do even greater works than Jesus does.

These three promises are familiar and comforting to most Christians, but as I read them over again this past week, the promise that grabbed my attention like never before was the third one: “Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (v. 12).

Now, it is relatively easy for us to affirm that Jesus has a special relationship with the Father, and that we have a special relationship with the Father through Jesus. You and I can even buy the notion that as Jesus’ followers we do the same work that Jesus does. But for Jesus

to point to his own work and then claim that we will perform “greater works than these,” for him to say that you and I will have a ministry that surpasses his – this is nothing short of mind-boggling! Think about the amazing feats that Jesus has performed by this point in the Gospel of John. You’ve surely heard about the miraculous healings, the changing of water into wine, the restoring of sight to the blind, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. And yet, Jesus boldly predicts that his disciples will do even greater marvels than he has done. On the eve of his death, those being left behind are filled with worry and dread, but they are also being filled with power because of their relationship with Jesus. As our Lord leaves his disciples, he promises them a divine power surge.

When you engage with our own congregation, you may feel warmth, friendliness, caring, and joy, but do you feel power? There are so many aspects of modern life that make us feel powerless. We live on a crowded planet where a deadly virus can be transmitted from one country to another and from one town to another in the twinkling of an eye, and the only power we have over this virus is to hide from it in our homes.

We often feel powerless in a modern bureaucratic state, where our identity is reduced to a number, not a name. The promise was that in a democracy each of us would feel empowered to help shape the direction of our society. But how much power do you feel surging through your veins when you cast a vote in an election? “What’s the use of trying to change things? I’m just one person.” That’s how one young adult explained why she was totally inactive in politics.

Religious institutions also feel powerless in a society that is becoming increasingly secular. In this day and age, who even listens to our pronouncements? Who in our community cares that we care about them? Churches continue to shrink in size and influence, leading its members to ask the same question the disciples ask, “What is to become of us?”

It is to these fearful, anxious disciples that Jesus promises, “Those of you who believe in me will do even greater works than I have done.” I wonder this morning: do you really believe that? Do you believe that the Church, for all its faults, is empowered to do even greater works than the works done by Jesus?

Well, one can certainly make a case for Jesus’ claim, just by reviewing the facts of history. Jesus’ earthly ministry occurs within a short window of time and a very limited space. He preaches and ministers for only three years, and he never ventures beyond a 100-mile radius of his hometown. Many of his first followers are powerless, poor, provincial, and illiterate. They live long before the advent of automobiles, air travel, telephones, TV, and the Internet – the modern inventions that make our big world a “global village” and allow us to spread the gospel at warp speed. In the 20th Century, Billy Graham preached Jesus Christ to more people in one night than Jesus himself preached to in his entire public career. Throughout its history, the Church has been empowered to do greater and greater works – building cathedrals that dominate a skyline; creating hospitals, orphanages, retirement centers, colleges, seminaries, and publishing houses that elevate all of humanity.

I’m reminded every day that even a church of our modest size can do some pretty great things. During normal times, we can send our children and youth to summer church camps; we can offer scholarships to high school graduates; we can take mission trips to Ghana and Ecuador. During the Coronavirus crisis, we’ve learned that we can share our worship services with large

numbers of people without having a single soul sitting in the sanctuary; we can have Fellowship Hour on our computer screens; we can provide financial assistance to hurting people with the mere click of a button. None of these ministries exist at the time Jesus walks the earth. At least in this sense, our works are greater than his.

The point is not that you and I are in some sort of contest to outperform Jesus today. The point is that we live in an age where greater works in Jesus' name are truly possible, where we have more opportunity than our ancestors had to be caring and generous as individuals and as a church, where we can do things that even Jesus couldn't do because he lived in a different time and place. And the most important point is that God is still pouring out divine power on ordinary, anxious, fearful people like us.

As your pastor, I can testify to the truth of Jesus' promise: you will do even greater works than I. As evidence for that claim, I can scan this room and with my mind's eye I can see your faces, and I can also see many of you doing the very works that Jesus does. Jesus raises the dead. I have seen you arise from a heart-rending death or divorce and start a whole new life. Jesus heals the blind. I have seen you open the eyes of some despairing person to the vision of a new world simply by loving that person, by standing with that person and giving hope when there was no hope to be seen. Jesus turns water into wine. I have seen you transform what could be a dull, watered down Bible study into a spirit-filled imbibing of the new wine of God's presence, just by the way you taught the lesson.

Yes, it takes a lot of faith to believe what Jesus says about himself in today's Gospel lesson: I and the Father are one; when you've seen me, you've seen God. But it also takes great faith to believe what Jesus says about his Church: God is doing ever greater works through not-so-great people like us.

In today's Epistle lesson, the writer of 1 Peter says to a struggling early Christian congregation, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9a). What an astounding thing to say to this little group of early believers, hanging on by their fingernails in the face of imperial persecution. The word "priest" is commonly used in the Jewish Scriptures, but it rarely appears in our Christian New Testament. When the title "priest" is used, such as in the letter to the Hebrews, it is always applied to Jesus. Yet here in 1 Peter the case is different. Here, the term "priest" is applied to these ordinary Christians, these laity who are living out their faith in modest but meaningful ways. They are called the "royal priesthood" – the main preachers who tell the world about the ultimate triumph of God in Jesus Christ, the main ministers who perform great works in their own generation.

One of our United Methodist bishops tells about being asked by a pastor to come out to his small, rural church and baptize a 12-year old boy he had been instructing in the faith. The bishop was happy to oblige until the pastor said, "He very much wants to be immersed. Can you do that?" The bishop replied that he could, unwilling to admit that he had never baptized anyone by immersion.

The bishop arrived that Sunday morning and found the pastor standing with the boy on the front steps of the little church. "Jeremy, this is the bishop," the pastor said proudly. "It's an honor for you to be baptized by the bishop." Young Jeremy looked the bishop over and said only, "They tell me you've never done one of these before. I'd feel better if we had a run-

through beforehand.” “That was just what I was going to suggest, the bishop said. They went into the church’s fellowship hall, where the pastor showed the bishop their newly purchased font, which was actually a small tank, dressed up by a carpenter in the congregation, surrounded by pots of flowers. Jeremy said to the bishop, “After you say the words, then you take my hand and lead me up these steps, and do you want me to take off my socks?” “You can leave them on if you want,” the bishop said.

Well, they had a wonderful service that Sunday. The bishop preached on baptism, the choir sang a baptismal anthem, then the whole congregation recessed into the fellowship hall and gathered around the tank posing as a font. The bishop went through the baptismal ritual. Then he asked Jeremy if he had anything to say to the congregation before his baptism. Jeremy said, “Yes, I do. I just want to say to all of you that I’m here today because of you. When my parents got divorced, I thought my world was over. But you stood by me. You told me the stories about Jesus. And I just want to say to you today, thanks for what you did for me. I intend to make you proud as I’m going to try to live my life the way Jesus wants.”

The bishop was weeping profusely by this time. As he led Jeremy up the steps into the pool, Jeremy asked him, “Are you going to be OK?” The bishop baptized Jeremy, and the church sang a great “Hallelujah!”

Friends, God is still pouring out his power on ordinary, anxious, fearful people like us, enabling us to claim new life for the mission of Christ. Our works may not always be greater than his, but they are greater than we ever could have imagined.