

Psalm 31:1-5  
John 14:1-14

“Even Greater Works”

R.P.C.  
May 18, 2014

Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

In our text from John’s Gospel for today, Jesus proclaims himself to be “the way, the truth and the life.” Therefore he is the unique way for his followers to come to the Father.

As a context for this declaration - in the passage just prior to the one we shared - Jesus was at table with his disciples. In that setting he told them the truth of what was to follow – one of them was to betray him. In others words, one of those sharing that meal in those moments with Jesus would “sell Jesus out,” and all of the other disciples would then flee when the soldiers come and the going gets rough.

This setting makes it all the more remarkable that in today’s passage, Jesus makes two astounding claims for his followers: One, they can do “even greater works” than he has performed; and two, if they ask for ANYTHING, he will do it. Imagine ... putting that kind of trust IN and responsibility UPON the very people who Jesus knew were about to betray and deny him.

Can Jesus really be serious here? Will the disciples eventually do ‘greater works than these,’ – greater works than the Son of God, the light of the world? We quickly notice that Jesus promises that his disciples - frail sinners like us - will do “even greater works, BECAUSE ... I (Jesus) am going to the Father.” In other words, when followers go great things, they do so only through a relationship with Jesus, who is in a unique relationship with God the Father.

He is the vine; we are the branches. In Christ, God has done something about the problem between God and us. We who were so far off are invited to God’s table as participants in God’s great redemption of a lost world; and soon we are to be presented at the throne of God by the Son of God. This factor is all because, Jesus, the one who sits at that table with these first disciples, is the one who is “going to the Father.”

A huge theological claim is being made here. When Jesus says that we will be able to do “greater works” than even he, he is not making a flattering claim about us. He is self-revealing his unique relationship to the Father. Thus 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth said that when someone hears - really hears - a revelation from God in the scripture – that is a God-moment akin to God’s creation of the world. It is a miracle on par with what God did in the first chapter of Genesis - It is a whole new world!

So today's gospel implies that when, in our little lives, we allow our 'lights to shine' – when we dare to play our bit part in the grand drama of God's redemption of the world; it is something close to what Jesus has done for us dying sinners in his cross and resurrection. Thus Jesus makes the bold claim that our deeds will be even greater; for he will make our human deeds his divine deed.

Jesus was the means for working that great miracle of God through the multiplying of a few loaves and fishes to provide a banquet on a hillside with more than enough food to feed all. YET, a similar miracle is how Jesus is using people now – people like you and me to multiply the good that God wants to do in the world.

We see the evidence of that fact on our evening news casts.... Even before the dust began to settle after a series of tornadoes tore through Alabama in one day a week after Easter a few years ago, we could watch a church van, full of volunteers of all ages, show up to help a devastated little town. As we watched folks get off that van, with tools in hand, to work with the victims of the storms, we saw a whole new world – a light shining in a terrible darkness. When all such acts of compassionate emergency assistance occur, we may be seeing a work as great, and maybe even greater in its own way, than one of Jesus' great miracles.

In this conversations Jesus had with his disciples he was more than just a great moral teacher, a stunning ethical example. He says that he is "going to the Father" so that "the Father may be glorified by the Son." In saying that we will do "greater works than these" Jesus implies that as he moves toward the Father, so do we. The Father is being glorified by the Son but is also being glorified even by sinners like us: Jesus is our way to God. And as Jesus goes to the Father, he takes us along with him.

An executive presbyter made a visit to a rather small, once- struggling church on the outer boundaries of the presbytery. The church had called a seminary graduate that past year as pastor, and the exec wanted to check on her progress. Upon her arrival, this pastor had told the congregation that one of her particular ministerial gifts was ministry with children. She had earned a master's degree in early childhood education and taught before her call to the ministry. The congregation's response: "We haven't had a children's Sunday School class in over a decade. No children!"

The exec was thrilled to find however, during the one year the pastor had been there two ministry groups had been started with some 20 children now attending. "What did you do to get these results?" asked the executive.

“I prayed,” she replied. “I told the Lord, ‘If you want this church to have a future, you’ll have to do it. Please Lord, send us some of your kids, so they can be our kids, and we promise to do the rest.’” “In only six months of continuous prayer, we got our first young family, and it grew from there.” The exec reflected on the fact that the Lord had made good on his promise: “The Father will give whatever you ask of him in my name.” He wasn’t thinking specifically about this passage from John 14. But what happened here was “an even greater work.”

The exec then visited a church that was in serious decline primarily due to constant conflict within the congregation. “For a long time we have prayed to God to heal our divisions,” the pastor of that church reported.” “We prayed that God would give us peace and harmony as a church.”

Based on what had occurred at the previous congregation, the exec suggested: “Perhaps more than praying for peace and harmony, you could also pray to God to make good on the promise that even you will do even greater works in God’s name. In other words, reach out instead of being so focused on yourselves and your internal problems as a congregation; give yourselves away...”

Many modern folks complain that part of their problem with Jesus is that they lack sufficient knowledge about Jesus. In this, our “age of information,” there are so many gaps in our information about him. And frankly, some of the information – say when one compares the accounts of Jesus in Mark’s gospel with what we are told in John – the information seems ambiguous and conflicting. So I suspect that it is easier for us “moderns” to turn Jesus into an intellectual problem to be solved.

So we await the results of more historical research on Jesus. We assume that if we just had more verifiable, uncontested facts about Jesus, we would know for sure who he was, and thus it would be easier for us to believe. The modern world we have inherited was in great part built on an intellectual quest for sure and certain knowledge. History then becomes another science as scholars methodically peel away at the accounts, taking them down to the absolute certain facts. Perhaps that is why we are SO attracted to and excited by the “scientific” discoveries such as the Shroud of Turin. Or more recently, the confirmation as to the antiquity of the papyrus fragment dating to about 800 AD, which states that Jesus had a female disciple ... and a wife named Mary. Such instances make us THINK about Jesus, as to who he was.

But Jesus never once said, “THINK about me.” Instead he said, “Follow me.” Or, more typical of John’s Gospel, Jesus says even more engagingly, “Love me.” Love that is only knowledge ABOUT love is not yet true love. As Jesus says, it is blessed

to know him, but more blessed to do as he does (John 13:17). Thus he would transform this talk at the table with his disciples into an example for them and us to follow throughout life, a command for us to obey.

Sometimes we preachers unwittingly imply that the greatest challenge of the Christian faith is in “right thinking.” Thus we sometimes present Jesus as a sort of folk philosopher who is difficult to understand. Or that the Christian faith is a set of some sort of often baffling ideas or some principles to follow. So it is good to be reminded by this 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John that the test of faith – indeed its very essence – is in the doing.

It’s like a pastor speaking to a colleague as they met for lunch. “I had been trying to get that church in gear for four years,” he said. “It was like beating my head against a brick wall.”

“But then I preached this SERMON – not an especially moving one in my opinion.” “I didn’t intend for this sermon to be heard as a call to be engaged in mission and our need to get involved.” “I had sort of given up on that idea, actually.”

But on the Monday morning after the sermon, a woman, one of our most senior members, called and said, “I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night. I couldn’t get your sermon out of my head.” “My sermon? I asked in astonishment.” “Yep, your sermon. When you asked on yesterday’s sermon, ‘If this church disappeared from the town today, would anybody notice a difference?’ I just couldn’t get that out of my brain.” “I want you to know that I’m ready to work with you to make this church make a difference in this town.” “When can you meet me at the church office?”

The pastor then told his colleague, “that woman’s effort spurred on by one little throw-away, passing comment in a sermon, gave that church a new lease on life. Now they have a food pantry for the poor, a clothes closet; they participate in an Angel Tree Project, and new missions are being explored at every meeting. All of this is because one single person heard something mentioned in a sermon - heard her name called. Just one person ....”

I usually try to be a hard-working preacher, but I know what is really going on here at Riverside.... I fully understand that some of the best preaching in this congregation is not done by me, but is done by you. I’ll grant you it takes a measure of inspiration from the Holy Spirit to prepare a sermon and then stand up here and deliver the gospel in front of this congregation. But it takes even more courage, conviction and all the rest to speak of and act out the gospel truth

in a corporate board room, or in a public forum, or at the meeting of the condo board.

Now, I'm not sure that my preaching or your preaching through your witness is "greater" than the preaching of Jesus; but I know that what you do, and say, and the witness you present is 'great preaching' in the most faithful sense of that word. And I know and believe that the deeds that you do have that "even greater than these" quality about them because Jesus takes your efforts and transforms them into his divine deeds.

In one of his letters to one of those many troubled, turbulent congregations, Paul says that "God chose what is foolish" – that is us – "in order to confound the wisdom of the world." Then to add insult to injury, Paul with candor calls us "lowly and despised." Yet miraculously we have been redeemed by God to do God's work in the world. It is as if God is saying, "Do you have any doubts that I am a glorious God?" "Then look at my handiwork in this world, accomplished in and through the lives of frail, fallen and finite creatures." "Look at the church, which the world considers to be of "low degree." "Yet, I have made them into something grand and glorious, as they serve me to meet the needs of this world."

As John's Gospel reminds us, we worship Jesus as the Word Incarnate – the word in flesh. That means we are to be attentive to not only what Jesus says, but to what he does. In Jesus, the Word made flesh became the Word in deed. Having said, down through the ages, "I love you," God turned love to action and showed up as the Son.

And now the Son has made the astounding promise that we – even we - would be able to accomplish "even greater works" than he has performed. Such an extravagant promise is possible in the lives of Christians only because Jesus is one with the Father.

IMAGINE ...The promise of "even greater works...." Imagine ... imagine putting that kind of trust IN and responsibility FOR his kingdom ... in us. And so, he does..... Amen.