

Greater Works

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John 14:1-14

14 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going.” 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. 11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. 12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

TROUBLED DISCIPLES

I want to concentrate on verse 12 of our lesson for today. Jesus told his disciples that they would do greater works than the works he had done. I find this very hard to believe. The disciples didn’t seem like people who would do greater works.

Think about those first disciples. In verse 1 of our lesson for today we read that their hearts are troubled. Why are their hearts troubled?

Well, Jesus has disappointed them in a number of ways. On the same night that he was betrayed, the night of the Last Supper, Jesus washed his disciples' feet and said that this was what his kingdom was all about ... humble service.

The disciples were astounded. What kind of Messiah washes his disciples' feet? Who wants to support a Messiah who acts like a slave? It didn't make sense. Maybe some of them wondered if they had made a mistake in following a man like Jesus.

But, it got worse. Jesus announced that one of his disciples was going to betray him. And because of this betrayal he would soon be "leaving" his disciples. Where he was going they could not follow.

(Nobody asked what this meant, but I think they got the idea. Betrayal would mean death at the hands of the authorities. This was more of that cross talk that they wanted so much to avoid.)

All this was too much for Peter. Peter said, "I won't betray you Jesus. I'll stay with you. I'll go where you go and follow you to the bitter end.

And then Jesus told Peter the awful truth, "Before the cock crows you will deny me three times."

No wonder the disciples' hearts are troubled. Betrayal, denial and death are in the wind. Jesus is leaving, and there is nothing that they can do about it.

And yet Jesus tells the disciples that they will do greater works than he has done! I find this very hard to believe.

And since John writes his gospel so that we might come to faith, this message is for us as well. Jesus is telling us that we will do greater works than he has done. Now that is even harder to believe!

I can believe that Jesus will do great works. I can even believe that those early disciples were transformed by the power of the Spirit into bold evangelists and did great works.

But, when I look at my own life and the life of the church today I don't see that. I don't see greater works. In fact I often see the betrayal of Jesus by what we do and the denial of Jesus by what we say.

My heart is troubled. We are not the disciples that we should be.

Jesus tells us that he is the way, the truth and the life. But, we do not follow the way of Jesus, and it is very troubling indeed.

So, how do we go from troubled hearts to greater works?

We make that journey by remembering that it's not about what we can do. It's about what God has already done in Jesus.

### A PLACE TO STAY

In verse 2 of today's lesson Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many dwelling places." We often think of this in a very physical way.

The King James Version of the Bible translates this: "in my Father's house are many mansions." We sort of get a picture of heaven in the future. God is doing some home renovation, expanding his mansion in the sky to house all of the people that will be saved.

But, the word translated dwelling place actually means a "staying" or an "abiding." It means that though Jesus is gone physically the disciples will not be left alone.

The presence of God will be with them. God will abide with them. They will not be alone.

My Greek dictionary put it this way: "metaphorically, of God and Christ by their power and spirit exerting a most blessed influence on the souls of believers." In other words this "dwelling place" refers primarily to a relationship instead of a literal place. It is a metaphor for the hospitality of God.

We might say to someone, “I will always have room in my heart for you.” That means, “I love you. I will not forget you. I treasure my relationship with you. If I have anything to say about it, this will not be the last time I see you.”

That’s what Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us. There is a wideness in God’s mercy. There is room in God’s house for many. God’s forgiveness and grace are expansive.

So this promise of an abiding is not just about heaven in the future. It is about the presence of God here and now. Jesus told his disciples that even in his absence He would continue the work He has begun in them.

They will have an abiding place with God.

In other words the absence of Jesus will not sever his relationship with the disciples. It will deepen that relationship.

#### THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE

Besides the promise of God’s abiding presence, Jesus also tells them that He will be with them in His teachings.

How do we know that God is with us? People define God in many different ways. How do we know who to follow and what to believe?

Jesus told the disciples, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

These lonely troubled disciples are worried that they will not know where to turn or what to believe when Jesus is gone. Jesus said,

“Think about what I have said and done. This will give you guidance. This will bring substance to your thoughts about the God who abides with you at all times.

This will be the way to God. This will bring you the truth about God. This will bring you life.”

What do we mean when we say that Jesus is the way the truth and the life?

First, it is the way of selfless service. In the chapter before this one, John gives us his account of the Last Supper. But, John doesn't emphasize the meal.

Instead he emphasizes what happens before the meal. Jesus girds himself with a towel and washes the feet of his disciples. Jesus said, "This is a picture of what it means to be my disciple."

Second, the way of Jesus is the way of forgiveness. Jesus has no illusion about his disciples. He knows that they will betray him, deny him and run away.

But, Jesus does not condemn them. Instead he seeks to comfort them. He tells them to love and forgive each other as he has already forgiven them.

Third, the way of Jesus is the way of sacrifice. We believe that Jesus is a true revelation of God. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is a human picture of the heart of God. If you want to tell the truth about God, you have to talk about the man, Jesus.

And so, when Jesus asks God to forgive those who are crucifying him, then you see what God is all about. If you want to draw close to God, you have to come through Jesus. There is no other way.

And that way is the way of forgiveness.

So, the disciples now have two promises that will lead them to faith when their hearts are troubled. First, they are assured that God will be with them. Second, they will know the way to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.

## ASKING IN HIS NAME

And third, God in Christ will provide what they need to do ministry.” Jesus told the disciples, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

I am often amazed at how God can use broken people as powerful instruments of His grace. Not only does God in Christ promise to comfort the disciple with the troubled heart; God in Christ also promises to empower that disciple to do significant ministry in His name.

Jesus said what only God could say, and Jesus did what only God can do. And Jesus told those first disciples that his words and works were just the start of something really big. Jesus said in effect,

“You are going to continue my work. More than that, you’re going to do even greater things than I have been able to do. When I ascend into heaven I’m going to empower you with the Spirit. If you ask for something in my name, I’ll see that you get it.”

Now what does that mean?

Have you seen that credit card commercial with Samuel L. Jackson? He is touting a card that will give you 1.5 percent cash back on *everything*.

Jackson says everything means everything, not just 1.5 percent cash back on what you buy at the hardware store, not just 1.5 percent cash back on certain things. With this card everything means everything.

With a vision of the infinite universe rolling in the background, Jackson gets that signature bug-eyed look and asks, “What’s in your wallet?”

Some Christian evangelists make this promise sound like Samuel L. Jackson hawking credit cards. Jesus has promised to give us anything we ask for. If you’re not getting “everything” you’re not asking. You need more faith.

But, unlike Jackson’s credit card this is a limited offer.

We must ask for what we need in Jesus' name. In other words we ask not for ourselves. We ask for the glory of God's kingdom. This is more apparent in verse 13. Jesus said, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

That doesn't mean that we just end every prayer with "in Jesus name we pray. Amen." That means that the requests we make should be in line with the way of Jesus. We ask not only "what would Jesus do" but also "what would Jesus desire."

Our desires are a reflection of what we really believe about the way, the truth and the life. And if we want to come to the Father, if we want to get in touch with the Divine, then we have to go the way of Jesus, the way of service, sacrifice and forgiveness.

And what seems like a very modest way is in fact the way to true power.

We can rest assured that if God in Christ abides in us, what we ask for will be according to His will. God in Christ through the power of the Spirit will take our human deeds and make them divine.

## THE MIRACLE OF MULTIPLICATION

Remember the miracle of the loaves and the fishes? Jesus multiplied a few loaves and a couple fish into a meal that fed multitudes. In a similar way Jesus uses people like you and me to multiply the good that He wants to do in the world.

Not too long ago tornadoes tore through Alabama one week after Easter. A pastor said that even before the dust settled he watched a church bus full of volunteers of all ages show up in a devastated little town.

He said that as "folks got off that bus with tools in hand to work with the victims of that storm, I saw a whole new world, a light shining in a terrible dark. I saw a work as great, maybe even greater in its own way, than Jesus' great miracles."

Jesus suggests that as He moves toward the Father so do we. The Father is not only glorified by the Son, but also by sinners like you and me.

Jesus is our way to God. And as Jesus goes to the Father He takes us along with Him.

The earliest accounts of the Christian faith come from the letters of Paul. And one of those letters was written to an exceptionally troubled congregation, the church at Corinth.

This church was a mess. Their theology was bad. They had significant divisions in the church. Many of their members were immoral in their behavior.

If the Corinthian Church had been Presbyterian, I would have suggested to the Committee on Ministry that we shut it down and build a new church somewhere else. It was that bad.

But, Paul didn't see it that way.

Paul said that despite all their faults and troubles, God would use them. In fact God has a track record of choosing the foolish in order to highlight the miracle of grace.

God chooses the low and the despised to show that the power is not in what we do but in what God does through us. When God works through us the possibilities are unlimited. (See 1 Corinthians 1:27)

And so Jesus told troubled disciples that would soon betray him, deny him and run away,

“I am going to use you in an extraordinary way. I am going to do great things through you by the power of the Spirit, even greater things than I have done.

Don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't be afraid. Trust in me. Believe in me. God has room in his house for one more sinner saved by grace. God has room in His heart for you.”

A Methodist pastor told his bishop,

“I had been trying to get that church in gear for four years. It was like beating my head against a brick wall. Then I preached this sermon. I really didn’t intend to preach on the church’s mission and our need to get involved. I had about given up, actually.

Well, Monday morning a woman, one of our most senior members, called and said, ‘I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night. I just couldn’t get your sermon out of my mind.’”

The pastor replied in astonishment, “My sermon?”

And the lady replied, “Yes, your sermon.”

“When you asked in last Sunday’s sermon, ‘If this church disappeared from this town today, would anybody note the 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?”

The pastor said,

“That woman’s effort, spurred on by one little throw away comment in my sermon, has given this church a new lease on life.

We now have a food pantry for the poor, a clothes closet, Angel tree ... you name it. All this happened because one single person heard something mentioned in a sermon, just one person.”

## THE BODY OF CHRIST

John reminds us that long ago some self-centered anxious disciples huddled together in an upper room. And they asked Jesus, “What is to become of us?”

And Jesus told them, “Don’t worry. You have a room in my Father’s house. Just follow my way, and you will be empowered to change the world.”

And it happened. We are still talking about what they did today.

We are still the body of Christ. We are still empowered to follow the way of Christ and reveal the true nature of God to the world. We are not helpless.

In the epistle lesson for today (1 Peter 2:2-10) the writer tells a struggling congregation, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”

That was an amazing thing to say to a church that was hanging on by its fingernails. The word priest is rarely used in the New Testament and when it is used it is usually applied to Jesus.

But, here ordinary Christians are called priests. Ordinary Christians are called a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and God’s own people.

And today we hear that same message.

We who are hanging on by our fingernails have been entrusted with a divine message. We who live a life filled with trouble and pain have been entrusted with the healing touch of Jesus.

We too will do greater works through the power of his Spirit.

Amen.