

Greater Works

As we talked about last week, many of us carry a lot of baggage when it comes to church. Some of us have some baggage with scripture and some of us have baggage with our faith. Some of that baggage comes from what we learned when we were little, or things we have heard in the past, ways we have been treated, or experiences that we have had.

Today's scripture is one of those readings that many of you have heard pieces of before and I'm sure, wondered what it really meant.

This is often a scripture that we hear read at funerals because it contains words that Jesus used to comfort his disciples when he knew that he would be going away. This passage occurs immediately after Jesus reveals to his disciples that he will be with them "only a little longer." This, the night he will be arrested. He has washed the disciples' feet, he has broken bread with them, he has told them that above all else they should love one another.

Imagine the emotions in the room. In one evening, so many of the core elements of who Jesus is, practiced among the disciples. His love for them, palpable. His news, difficult to comprehend. It's no wonder our scripture begins with Jesus' plea that they not let their hearts be troubled. Because, I think their hearts were troubled.

What follows are words of reassurance. It is a promise to hold on to when the days ahead hurt and the way is unclear; Jesus is preparing them for his death. But he is also assuring them that his presence will carry on, if they carry it on.

Historically, the typical sermon on this text emphasizes a focus either on the reference to "My father's house where there are many rooms" as an external space in the afterlife or the function of Jesus declaring himself "the way, the truth, and the life." Unfortunately, this scripture has become a hotbed for destructive theological takes that emphasize individualism in life after death and promises of eternal damnation for anyone who does not "believe" in Jesus as the singular pathway to God.

This scripture has been used to divide rather than to unite, to exclude rather than to include, and to judge rather than to love. What we need to remember is that Christianity is not a club. It is not about who is "in" and who is "out" or who is worthy and who is unworthy. It is not about a list of rules or an insurance policy to get into heaven.

It is not about jumping through hoops or proving that you're good enough. Christianity is supposed to simply be a way of life. It is supposed to be something that encourages you to love your neighbor whoever your neighbor might be and to work for the good of all.

Somehow, the words of scripture sometimes get twisted or people misunderstand or carry too much baggage with them. When Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," Jesus was talking to a group of his followers and that statement was true for them just like it is for me.

But Jesus never said that that was true for everyone. He never said that you had to be Christian to be a good person. He never said people of other faiths or traditions or cultures or beliefs could not know or experience God in their own way. His words were not meant to condemn or judge anyone. They were merely meant to encourage and comfort his disciples at that time.

The part I want to focus on this morning is the second part of our scripture that often gets lost in its reading. All along, Jesus has been pointing to a common Sacred source in the midst of his teaching, practices and advocacy for others. Now, he reminds the disciples, that same God that showed love through Jesus, that same God is within them when they embody God in the world.

The disciples are so caught up in Jesus embodying God, that they struggled to recognize God in themselves and each other. Jesus is trying to show them that they were going to make a bigger impact on the world than he ever could!

Josiah Young, III wrote about this verse, "Jesus foreknew that his witness to the kingdom of God would touch all manner of persons who would do things that Jesus, limited as he was to his first century context, was unable to do."

Have you ever thought about that? Jesus was in a certain time, in a certain place to do his ministry. He needed his disciples and us, to realize that we can reach farther than he could during his earthly life. So he is trying to make his disciples, and us realize that God is in each one of us and that multiplies the impact from one person to millions of people to do greater things than Jesus did during his three years of ministry.

Jesus is saying God takes on flesh through all of us as we practice love and justice. We would do well to learn from the life of Jesus, but our lesson for today invites us to remember that his teachings were pathways, frameworks, parables – not formulas to be applied equally across all time and identity. Our faith gives us the tools we need to enable God's working through us in new ways, different ways, even "greater ways" based on where we are in the here and now.

We don't have to pretend that Jesus knew all there was to know about justice or that he even practiced it in fullness. We know his solidarity with women, for example but it could have been more radical. We know that our own gender justice, rooted in our faith, takes on flesh differently today in our context. For one, our church lets women speak!

So what is Jesus telling us this morning? "Don't toe the line. It is not enough to just do what you've always done or what you learned in Sunday School or what you were told in the past. Don't get frustrated because I need you! I need you to be my hands and feet on this earth. I need you to keep loving. I need you to keep teaching. I need you to keep encouraging. I need you to keep telling my stories and sharing the good news with the world!

You are going to do greater works than I have done! Think about that. Jesus said 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. Did you hear that? Will do greater works than these!"

It's not enough to toe the line. It is not enough to go through the motions. It is not enough to carry on the traditions from generations past. We need to do better. We need to be creative. We need to brainstorm new ideas and reach out in new ways because, as Jesus told us, we are called to do even greater work!

My friends, I think we are doing that. I believe that our re-development project is a greater work being done in the name of Jesus. Its been a lot of work, a lot of visioning, a lot of talking, a lot of clarifying, a lot of apologizing and a lot of faith walking. But what I want us to remember today is this. Remember that the possibilities for our future are endless. We don't all have to be the same, we simply need to remember who and whose we are, encouraging others to do the same as we energetically and creatively live out our faith, loving and serving others as Jesus taught us, showing love enfleshed in each one of us, as we open ourselves up to the greatness that God is leading us to.

I was driving to work on Wednesday trying to figure out how to close out my sermon, because that's what pastors do, try to figure out a closing all the time. And on my car radio came a song from the movie, "The Greatest Showman". The song is called "A Million Things."

Here are the lyrics:

I close my eyes and I can see
The world that's waiting up for me
That I call my own.
Through the dark, through the door
Through where no one's been before
But it feels like home.

They can say, they say it all sounds crazy
They can say, they can say I've lost my mind
I don't care, I don't care, so call me crazy
We can live in a world that we design.

'Cause every night I lie in bed
The brightest colors fill my head
A million dreams are keeping me awake
I think of what the world could be
A vision of the one I see
A million dreams is all it's gonna take
Oh a million dreams for the world we're gonna make.

There's a house we can build
Every room inside is filled
With things from far away.
The special things I compile
Each one there to make you smile

On a rainy day.

They can say, they can say it all sounds crazy
They can say, they can say we've lost our minds.
I don't care, I don't care if they call us crazy
Runaway to a world that we design.

Every night I lie in bed
The brightest colors fill my head
A million dreams are keeping me awake
I think of what the world could be
A vision of the one I see
A million dreams is all it's gonna take
Oh a million dreams for the world we're gonna make.

However big, however small
Let me be part of it all
Share your dreams with me
You may be right, you may be wrong
But say that you'll bring me along
To the world you see
To the world I close my eyes to see
I close my eyes to see.

Every night I lie in bed
The brightest colors fill my head
A million dreams are keeping me awake
I think of what the world could be
A vision of the one I see
A million dreams is all it's gonna take
Oh a million dreams for the world we're gonna make.

Today's vote after worship is an important step as move forward to make a bigger impact on not just our corner of Woodward and Adams, but as a beacon of hope to congregations across the country who can develop housing wherever they are located. This will be a shining light to discouraged folks who feel the church doesn't care about them because they are outside our sanctuary walls.

Today we will be one step closer to doing the greater works that God has called us to do. Jesus says to us again this morning, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and Trust in me. Amen.