

In this morning's Gospel, from chapter 14 of John's Gospel, Jesus gathers with his disciples to prepare them for the somber events that are to come. When his disciples express anxiety about Jesus' departure, an exasperated Jesus asks, "Have you been with me so long and still you don't know me?"

He makes an astounding claim for himself: he and the Father are one, so much are they one that the "Father who dwells in me does his works." Jesus is able to do that which only God can do.

But then there is more. Jesus prepares his followers by empowering them, reassuring them that "you are going to do greater things than I have done." Greater things than even Jesus has done? How can that be? Jesus has done some amazing things by this point in the Gospel of John.

You have heard about the healings, the changing of water to wine, the restoring of sight to the blind, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, as we have preached our way through much of the Gospel of John this year.

And yet Jesus boldly predicts: you will do even greater things than I have done, implying that these disciples, so filled with dread and anxiety, are also being filled with a miraculous power because of their relationship with Jesus. Even as Jesus has glorified the Father through his powerful works, so will we glorify the Father, through Jesus, by the works that we shall do.

As Jesus leaves his disciples he promises them a divine power surge.

When you look at our church, you may think warmth, friendliness, or maybe even joy, but do you feel power? There are so many aspects of modern life that make us feel powerless. We live our lives under the watchful, well, mostly watchful eye of the modern bureaucratic state where we are reduced to a number, not a name. We feel a dissipation of the power of the individual in our modern world.

The promise was that in a democracy each of us would feel empowered to help shape the direction of our society. But “politics” doesn’t always seem to work that way.

“What’s the use of trying to change things? I’m just one person. And it doesn’t seem to matter which political party is in office...the problems are always the same and everyone is always blaming someone else for them.” is how one young adult explained why she was totally inactive in politics.

Here is Jesus’ astounding promise: “The one who believes in me will do his work and will do even greater works because I am returning to the Father.” Jesus is returning to the Father. He returns, not as an able assistant of God the Father but as God’s Son, one with God. Now Jesus empowers us.

Here were a bunch of fearful, self-centered, anxious disciples, huddled together and asking only one question: “Oh Jesus, what is to become of us?” And it was to these that Jesus promised, “Those of you who believe in me will do even greater work than I have done.”

Do you believe it? Do you believe that our church, for all its faults (and we do have our share of faults...no church is perfect), is empowered to do even greater works than the works done by Jesus?

How did this Gospel of John begin to tell the story of Jesus? It began in much the same way as all the Gospels began: with Jesus beginning by calling a group of ordinary people to be his disciples. That’s the way Jesus works. In fact, the Gospel of John itself, written by some early follower of Jesus, is itself a fulfillment of Jesus’ promise.

Jesus preached some powerful sermons, did some mighty acts, but we would have known about none of it had it not been for the eloquent testimony of the writer of this Gospel. Jesus empowered some ordinary person to give an extraordinary divine witness to Jesus.

As your pastor, if I had the time in this sermon, I could testify to the truth of Jesus' promise: you will do even greater works than I. As evidence for that claim I would point to some of the people sitting here in this congregation this morning.

Jesus raised the dead. I have seen some of you raise up from heart-rending loss and start a whole new life.

Jesus healed the blind. I have seen you open the eyes of some despairing person to the vision of a new life simply by loving that person, by standing with them and giving hope when there was no hope to be seen.

Jesus turned 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.

I could go on. Sure it takes a great deal of faith to believe that Jesus is who he says he is...when we've seen Jesus, we've seen God. But it also takes some faith to believe what Jesus says about us: God is doing even greater works through not-so-great people like us!

By the way, in today's epistle, 1 Peter 2:2-10, the writer says to a struggling early Christian congregation, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." What an astounding thing to say to this little group of early believers, hanging on by their fingernails in the face of imperial persecution and scoffing!

The word "priest" is rarely used in the New Testament. When the title "priest" is used, such as in the letter to the Hebrews, it is always applied just to Jesus.

Yet here the case is different. Here "priest" is applied to these ordinary Christians, these laity who are living out the faith in their time and place. They are called "a chosen race," they are the "royal priesthood," the main preachers who tell the world about the ultimate triumph of God in Jesus Christ.

It's a great deal to claim for ordinary people like you and like me. We are God's great answer to what's wrong with the world. We are God's great, spirit-induced power surge into the world.

Now let's go live like it!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, though you ascended to your Father, reigning there as God, with God, you did not desert us. Rather you were with us in a whole new way. You have empowered us, even us, with your Holy Spirit. You have commissioned us, even us, to do the work of your kingdom. You have sent us, even us, as your emissaries in the world, your hands and feet, your heart for the world.

Give us the courage to see your power at work in us, even us. Embolden us to believe in ourselves as much as you believe in us. Amen.