

Sunday, May 10, 2020

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Pastor Sue McNicol – Aldersgate UMC

Butte, MT

Scripture Reading: John 14: 11-14 – The Inclusive New Testament

Believe me that I am in God and God is in me,
or else believe because of the works I do.

The truth of the matter is,
anyone who has faith in me will do the works I do -
and greater works besides.

Why? Because I go to Abba God,
and whatever you ask in my name I will do,
so that God may be glorified in me.

Anything you ask in my name
I will do.

Sermon: *Greater Works Than These*

Today marks the fifth Sunday of Easter on the church calendar. It also marks forty-four days since our Governor announced we would begin shelter-in-place in our state. Everything these days seems to be measured in numbers. I start my morning with a cup of coffee and local news and hold my breath as the number of COVID cases in Montana is projected on the screen. It's all about the numbers...number of cases, deaths and recoveries. Then there's the stock market numbers, job loss numbers and unemployment claims. And yet these numbers reflect so much more. *Lives* in turmoil or grief, *hopes* for stability and assurance of protection, *dreams* lost or needing provision and *fears* of every sort. It's overwhelming and under-affirming. In this sterile system of nameless statistics, we lose the humanness in our current condition. And that's where I find myself asking, "Where is God in all of this?"

According to our scripture reading today, Jesus assures his disciples he will do whatever is asked in his name, so that God may be glorified in the Son. This passage has everything to do with life here and now as Jesus is entrusting his mission to his disciples (all of us). He also goes on to clarify not only will he do great things but emphasizes WE will do greater works besides.

My initial thought given this biblical promise and our current world crisis is "Fix it God!" Fix our very human condition with your very miraculous promise. After all, we're much like those anxious, self-centered, fearful, rag-tag disciples Jesus was speaking to in John's gospel. Jesus performed many miracles – healing the blind, raising the dead – and not just among believers. So why not simply meet our demands (or prayers) ...and all will be well. The End! Perhaps the problem is that in hearing these promises, we expect *our greater works* to happen the same way Jesus performed them. This is where faith and reason come in. We have faith in a God without needing tangible evidence of our God's existence *and* we use reason to logically guide our existence here and now. I believe that's part of what today's scripture reading is suggesting – our greater works will involve both...we will incorporate God's promise of nurture and support while also integrating our human gifts of science and ability.

Here's where the numbers come in again...just what is the formula for success? Do we need 80% faith in God and 20% medical intervention to defeat this threat? If only it worked that way. Consider this, some who fall ill will survive and may have no faith in God at all. Others may perish despite a deep faith. We are not promised a precise outcome or success rate based on the depth of our conviction. But we are assured as Christians we are not alone, and we will be enveloped in God's grace and eternal love while on earth and long after. I firmly believe the measure of our greater works are key to God's promise in John's gospel.

The message is clear...Jesus is *the way* to God. Jesus is trying to explain this to the disciples in the verses leading up to today's scripture. He's preparing them for his death and where he's headed...to be with God. And despite the doubts of Thomas and Philip's need to see God to be satisfied, Jesus explains it's not just about seeing God and going to heaven. It's more than reaching a heavenly destination. Jesus is the path...the journey...the experience here and now

leading to God's promises. Thus, the call for us to be the hands and feet of Christ – to do as Christ did. Greater works among all people are evident today more than ever. Here's a few arbitrary numbers to consider...a group called Gowns4Good is collecting donated graduation gowns from high school and college graduates to donate to medical facilities for personal protective equipment. To date, over 6000 gowns have been collected (an example of greater works by creative thinkers). Over 500,000 people in Montana stayed home to help protect their neighbor and care for their own loved ones during the months of March and April (a great act of love in great number). Video meetings have become a communication lifeline for many businesses and shut-ins during our COVID isolation. Pat yourself on the back if you have learned how to participate in this new form of assembly and at times new form of ministry. There are 55 million video meetings per week taking place among American businesses alone. Imagine what that number would grow to if we calculated in every virtual family gathering and youth group chat. I can't even begin to report the numbers associated with donated medical masks, food, phone calls and check-ins, acts of kindness and so much more. It seems anything one asks now days is met with a hearty "I can do that for you."

This leads me to reflect on some of the most significant "can do" people I've met. Mothers! When life becomes overwhelming or far-reaching promises become confusing, it's those nurturers and caregivers who journey with us through the mess. It's those maternal figures in our lives who share of themselves and offer solace. They do as Jesus does for the disciples in our scripture today. They come along beside us and show us the path...they teach us how to be our best selves and how to be Christ-like. Today's the day we honor those who are among us and hold in remembrance those who have passed. They may be birth moms or adoptive mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, housemothers, mentors or friends...regardless the title, they have been protectors, teachers and guides assuring us we are not alone.

"Anything you ask in my name, I will do." God is saying if you seek to follow Christ you will be able to do that which you ask for. This is mind-blowing in the literal sense. If I follow Christ and ask for the ability to fly like a bird, will God then give me the ability to fly? No – likely not. But God may open my eyes in new ways and broaden my experiences such that I come to understand what flight might be like. My world may open up such that I become more mindful

of that which I seek – the ability to feel weightless and see things from a new perspective...to take more of an aerial view of the landscape of my life. That in turn may be how my prayer is answered. Growing up I often asked my mom for things far beyond her ability to deliver. It may have been a request to have a vacation adventure of travel abroad like my best friend. This extravagant request would be out of reach for our family. But mom would wrestle with my request and come up with something uniquely exciting...perhaps a road trip of our own design to places we'd never been, yet still just a tank of gas away. A milkshake at a soda fountain in a town never visited, shopping in a department store on main street and a scavenger hunt for colorful rocks and tadpoles along the riverbank before returning home. This is answered prayer – indeed!

God touches our lives through remarkable people, mysterious saints and ordinary encounters in innumerable ways because the world is full of Christ-like individuals. Mother God is with us whether we know it or not, thanks to her hands and feet here on earth. Take a break today from all the numbers swirling around in the news and focus on just one statistic. How many endearing women can you name who have touched your life? If we collectively tally all those numbers together we'll have an idea of how God's infinite arithmetic factors into creating a world of greater works...Thanks be to God. Amen