

Easter 5-May 7, 2023

Senior Recognition and Confirmation Sunday

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Acts 7:55-60, John 14:1-14

Believing and Greater Works

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The words from this gospel reading are likely familiar to many of you. I doubt that you remember them because you heard them spoken at a Graduation Ceremony for Seniors and you likely have never heard them delivered at a Confirmation Service. If these words are familiar to you, it is because you have heard them preached at a funeral. And for some of you, you might have a particular funeral in mind when you hear these words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."

But these words are not just to bring comfort to families who have lost loved ones. This reading for today contains words of promise, comfort, and hope that graduates and confirmands and each one of us should never get tired of hearing. These words describe to us what happens when we have faith, when we believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had a great number of people that were following him just before he said these words. People were impressed with what they saw Jesus do by performing miracles and healings of all kinds. Why wouldn't you want to follow someone who seems to have the secret to success? But then it seems out of the blue, Jesus says to those who were willing to listen to him, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." The people that heard these words didn't think there was any trouble on the horizon. They didn't realize the door that Jesus was about to pass through. These words from Jesus have often been given the title, "Jesus' Farewell Discourse." These words frightened the followers of Jesus and the thought of Jesus leaving them and going to the cross to die left these followers of Jesus wondering, "If Jesus is going somewhere, what are we going to do when he is gone?" Jesus knew that his followers would be troubled by their fears of the uncertain future. They were afraid that Jesus would be leaving them on the other side of the door that he would be passing through.

Whenever there is change of any kind in our lives, our fears of what will happen next can consume us. We often want the solution to our fears to be given a roadmap that will lead us back to the security that we had before there was a change or the certainty that the future will be better than before. This is what Thomas asked Jesus for. Thomas confessed that he didn't understand what Jesus meant when he said that he was going to prepare a place for him. Thomas wanted to be given the details of how he was to get from where Jesus was leaving to the place that he was going. But Jesus didn't give Thomas what he wanted. Jesus answered Thomas with a "Who" rather than a "How to". Jesus replied, "I am the Way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Another of Jesus' disciples heard what Jesus said and he wasn't satisfied with Jesus' response. Philip, like Thomas, wanted to be **shown the way** rather than trust in Jesus who told them that he is the way. Thomas and Philip wanted proof. Philip said that he would be satisfied if Jesus could just whip up one more miracle and then he would believe. Jesus did not accommodate Philip's wish to have him produce a sign. Instead, Jesus kept on speaking to these troubled hearts until they had faith in the words spoken by Jesus Christ.

*While these two were still hoping that Jesus will do some kind of sign before their eyes, Jesus tells them that they will be able to do whatever they saw him do and even greater works that Jesus did himself. What do you think about what Jesus said? Was Jesus just talking to Thomas and Philip or could he mean that you too could outdo the works that Jesus did?*

*Yes, Jesus was talking to you. But these works don't begin with you. They begin with faith in Jesus Christ. Listen again to what Jesus said. The one **who believes in me** will do the work that I do, and in fact will do greater works than these. Good works begin first by believing in Jesus. Then everything that once was impossible becomes possible.*

*We have some ambitious and talented graduates and confirmands. I have no doubt that they will accomplish great things as they pursue their plans. But the greater works that Jesus was referring to were not about careers that can be measured by the significant salaries they will earn or the number of people that will help. Jesus was never known for his wealth or keeping a tally for the number of people he helped. Jesus was known for forgiving sins, and many did not want to hear this is what Jesus was what he came into the world to do.*

*This class of confirmation students read through the book of Jonah as sixth graders and once again this year. This story is a good example of the great work that can be done amid trouble. Jonah, like each one of us, reluctantly wanted to deliver God's word of forgiveness to the wicked people of Nineveh. Jonah would have preferred to be sent to this city as a messenger of God if he was given the power to destroy the city. This city was evil and deserved punishment. But the Lord gave Jonah greater power than punishment and judgment. The Lord gave Jonah the words of forgiveness and to the dismay of Jonah everyone in this large city heard what he said and believed in God and the city was spared from destruction.*

*In our first reading for today, Stephen got himself into trouble by talking about Jesus. He didn't have the success rate that Jonah did. Instead of everyone listening to what he said, we are told that many closed their ears. Many did not hear Stephen cry out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." just before they took his life. The people that stoned Stephen deserved punishment, but Stephen delivered forgiveness despite never hearing a word of remorse or repentance. Stephen's word of forgiveness was unconditional. This was not the end of this story. Resurrection always follows death, and a greater work was about to happen during this very troubling story.*

*There was at least one set of ears that heard what Stephen said. Saul was in the crowd of people that watched the stoning of Stephen. Saul was another person who did not like hearing about the forgiveness of God. Saul persecuted Christians who believed in the message that Jesus delivered about forgiveness. This began to change when Saul heard Stephen pray, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The Spirit began to change Saul that day and completely transformed him later when he was struck blind as he walked on the road to Damascus. Saul, who was prevented from seeing anything that day, could hear everything. Saul became Paul who delivered faith by his preaching to more people than Jesus did, and he became the author of nearly ¾'s of the books of the New Testament. Paul, now a believer in Jesus, did greater works than Jesus.*

*You and I as believers in Jesus are also called to create faith by forgiving members of our families, our neighbors, and everyone who has ears that are willing to hear. This is the greater work that Jesus has given us to do. Our hearts have no need to be troubled for we believe in Jesus. Amen*

