



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“The Dreaded Sequel”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Acts 3: 1-10; John 14: 1-14

Our second reading, this morning, comes from the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to John. This is week two of our Lenten series focused on this ‘parting discourse’ that John frames between Jesus and his disciples. Starting with the washing of the feet in John 13, all the way through Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John 17, is set out by John as one long conversation that leads up to Jesus’ arrest in the 18th chapter of John’s gospel. And that context is particularly key, here, because I think we have to understand the state of mind of Jesus’ disciples as we ponder these words that he shares.

If we go back to the 13th chapter, we find the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet that we talked about last week. Immediately after that event, however, we have this initial exchange during which Jesus makes clear that there is someone who is going to betray him. It’s at that point that Judas abruptly leaves the room as Jesus tells him to ‘Do quickly what he is going to do,’ and then, as Judas departs, Jesus turns to the disciples and says, “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’” (John 13:33)

So, try to put yourself in that mindset. Jesus has turned things upside down by washing your feet when you know that you should be the one serving him. Jesus has claimed that someone in the room is going to betray him, but you don’t know what that means. He sent Judas off on some unknown task, and now he has announced that his time with you is coming to an end, and repeatedly told you that you can’t go where he is going and you will be together no longer. That’s a lot to handle. These disciples are confused, they are worried, and they are afraid. They have built not only their faith, but their entire lives, around this man who is now telling them that he’s leaving, and that they won’t be able to find him. It’s hard to even imagine the thoughts and emotions running through the room, but that is the scene into which Jesus speaks these words in John 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 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.

Now, I could have spent this entire Lenten season on those 14 verses. There is so much there! God’s house with many mansions... Jesus going to prepare a place for us... Thomas’ concern about knowing the way... Jesus’ self-identification as ‘the way, the truth, and the life’... Philip’s request to see God and Jesus’ response that they already have... The promise that Jesus will do ‘anything’ that asked for in his name... There is so much there, and I haven’t even yet pointed towards Jesus’ claim that ‘no one comes to the Father except through me,’ because I think we struggle with that one as much as anything. We could spend months on all of that, but for the purpose of today, it’s verse 12 that drew my attention – which we will get to in just a minute. First, however, let’s look at what Jesus is saying here.

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled,’ Jesus says in verse 1, ‘and do not let them be afraid.’ (John 14:1) This is Jesus’ initial response to that angst that has been built up in the events that we just outlined. To those confused, worried, scared disciples, Jesus turns and says, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled.’ Why? ‘Believe in God,’ our translation reads. ‘Trust’ is another translation that I think better fits what Jesus is getting at here. ‘Trust in God and trust in me,’ Jesus says. To those confused, worried, scared disciples, Jesus says, ‘Do not be troubled, because you can trust there is more to this story than you understand in this moment.’ Now, even though we didn’t go that far in our reading, it’s important to note that, later in John 14, Jesus gets a lot more into that particular promise. Jesus turns his attention later in this chapter to the gift of the Holy Spirit. “I will not leave you orphaned,” he says. ‘I will send you an advocate to be with you.’ Jesus digs much deeper into the presence of God that will continue in their lives, even after his departure, through the Spirit of God that will remain with them. That’s the fundamental message of John 14 in the wake of John 13. To those confused, worried, scared disciples, Jesus says that they need not be troubled, that they can trust in him, that God’s Spirit will be with them in all that lies ahead, and that there is yet still so much more to come. To those terrified disciples, grieving over the anticipated departure of their teacher and friend – and in that the end of this journey they’ve been travelling – Jesus responds in John 14 by reminding them that this journey they’ve been travelling, and the story they’ve been writing, has only just begun. And that is what brings me back to verse 12.

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says in verse 12, “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.”

(John 14:12) Just take a moment to think about that. Let that claim sink in. To these disciples, so confused by what has happened and so afraid of that which is yet to come – these disciples grieving over what they see to be the end of this journey they’ve been travelling – Jesus proclaims not only that the journey will continue, but will be even greater than that which has been seen in him. Let me say that again. To these disciples, so confused by what has happened and so afraid of that which is yet to come – these disciples grieving over what they see to be the end of this journey they’ve been travelling – Jesus proclaims not only that the journey will continue, but will be even greater than that which has been seen in him. I’m not sure any of us even begin to consider that such thing could ever be. Because, we all know that the sequel is never as good as the original.

That’s the sidebar that started floating in my mind as I reflected on this passage in the context of this series. I grew up in an era of notoriously bad sequels. Films of today seem to build the long-range storytelling in a way that sequels have a different nature and feel to them. When I looked up lists of the worst sequels of all time, however, what I found was that a large majority of those listed were released in that era of the late-70’s through the mid-90’s. Jaws, Police Academy, Major League, Caddyshack, Karate Kid, Revenge of the Nerds, Teen Wolf, Robocop... there is this cadre of huge blockbuster successes that were followed up with atrocious sequels that were slapped together in an attempt to try to capitalize on the success of the original. And, one after the next, they failed miserably. It was known thing, in my teens and twenties, that the sequel would simply never be as good as the first release. And, whether we realize it or not, that is precisely how we have viewed the Church for most all of the last 2,000 years since this very moment of Jesus talking with his disciples that night.

I’m not sure we necessarily state the concept outright, but the simple reality is that we view the Church, and the people of it, as the lesser sequel that could never, and will never, live up to the original. Honestly, how else could we view it? We are talking about mere, faulty, broken humans as compared to God incarnate. The world doesn’t get God incarnate anymore, so instead it gets us, the slapped together, messy, confusing and sometimes irritating sequel that is the Church and the people of it. It’s hard to see it any other way. And I will say that, even as I share these thoughts with you this morning, I still struggle to see it any other way. But, Jesus did!

“Very truly, I tell you,” Jesus says in verse 12, *“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.”* (John 14:12) There’s a lot to all of that, of course. This is stated in the context of the people trusting in Jesus, following his commandments, and being empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit. There is no claim here, by Jesus or by me, that people in and of their own frail capacities could ever do anything remotely akin to that which Jesus accomplished in this world. But, Jesus is pretty clear here. Those who do trust... who do keep those commandments... who are blessed by the Spirit... will do even greater things. To those terrified disciples, grieving over the anticipated departure of their teacher and friend – and in that the end of this journey they’ve been travelling – Jesus responds in John 14 not only by telling them that there will be a sequel, but that the sequel will outshine the original. So, we have to at least ask ourselves, could that really be?

I struggle, sometimes, when I read passages like that of Acts 3. It's one thing for me to try to get my mind wrapped around Jesus, in all of his divine glory, accomplishing tasks that are well outside the realm of anything I/we could do. When I start seeing others doing it, however, it forces me to stretch my thinking a bit. And it's not a story limited to this moment in Acts. There are other stories in Acts, as well as in the Gospels, in which people other than Jesus perform healings and miracles that are far beyond human explanation. I don't always know what to do with that, and there are a lot of thoughts and questions that rush to mind when I come back across these stories. Amidst all of that question and quandary, however, I do find myself fundamentally reminded that the biblical narrative has multiple examples of the glory of God being shone into this world in miraculous ways by those who weren't named Jesus.

So, I guess my point – or really my question for all of us – is this: if Peter could do that, and if Jesus's message to those terrified disciples was not only that there would be a sequel but that it would outshine the original, what does that say to us? As those who see ourselves, and the Church of which we are a part, as the slapped together, messy, confusing and sometimes irritating sequel to the original that could never be duplicated, what does it mean to consider the promise of Jesus that, in the gift the Spirit, the glory seen in him was seen to be but a prelude to that which would come through his people, and his Church, in the generations to follow?