

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 May 14, 2017,
 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This week we had a contractor in to look at our building to give us an estimate on repairs– the flooding with the heavy rains continues, our gutters are clogged and overflowing, the drains are filled (not as bad now after James' hard work on Friday afternoon on the "patio" at the nursery school entrance), water continues to come in, doing more damage to the walls in the back stairwell – there's actually moss growing on the building outside of the music office – the drain pipe there is completely detached.

Len and Tony, the contractor, and I walked the building and Len said, "It's time to fix all this." It's a matter of finding the problem and fixing it and then doing the repairs to the walls – I've seen Tony's work in Glen Ridge and he's pretty impressive - we don't have the numbers yet but it's a stark reminder of one step in what we face on our journey of discernment about our future ministry here at St. Paul's. I think we all wondered a bit, "What is to become of us."

In today's gospel, Jesus is speaking to his disciples in that upper room – his focus isn't on what's going to happen to him in another day, but instead what will happen to the disciples when he is gone from them. Of course the disciples are worried – they've walked with Jesus for a long time – they've learned from him – they've shared in his ministry – they have loved him – he has loved them - they're facing a terrible loss that they know is coming. And I can only imagine how fearful they are – are they at risk like Jesus? Will the authorities come after them too? They wonder, "What is to become of us."

All of us here this morning care deeply about St. Paul's, it's ministry, it's future. We're here because we want to follow Jesus, we want to walk with him, have been called and are responding to that call. Friends, Jesus is talking to us this morning as disciples – meeting us where we are on this post-Easter journey. And he is offering us the same thing he offered those first disciples so many years ago. He has gone ahead to prepare a place for us too – even as we may lose our way as we attempt to follow his path.

The good news is this: remember last week's psalm? The shepherd, tender and good, will come back for us seeking us on the paths and hillsides and streets and back hallways where we wander. God's love, made known to us in Jesus, will seek us out. Hope is alive and new life abounds for us too in this Easter season: that is the foundation and fount of our joy! Jesus speaks, not only to those present in the upper room that day, but to those who would come long after – Jesus speaks to us today.

He reassures his disciples – telling them not to be troubled – he tells them he and God are one – that he can do that which only God can do. But there's more. Jesus prepares his disciples by empowering them: reassuring them that "you are going to do greater things than I have done."

How can that be? Jesus has done some amazing things – healings, changing water to wine, restoring of sight to the blind, raising of Lazarus from the dead – and yet he boldly predicts, “You will do even greater marvels than I have done!”

Friends – he’s talking to us too!

Those early disciples and us too – we’re being filled with a miraculous power because of our relationship with Jesus. Even as Jesus has glorified the Father through his powerful works, so will we glorify the Father by the works that we shall do.

William Willimon says, “As Jesus leaves his disciples he promises them a divine power surge.” Wow.

When you look at our church, you probably think warmth, friendliness, or even joy, but do you feel power? So much in our lives makes us feel powerless, doesn’t it – how many times do we say or think, “What’s the use of trying to change things? I’m just one person.”

Think of what Margaret Mead said – Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For indeed, that’s all who ever have.

Jesus, the light of the world, has come into the darkness. And there was great resistance on the part of the world’s darkness then and there still is today – but the darkness has not and will not overcome the light. The light will eventually triumph. We believe that, don’t we. And John’s gospel would have us believe even more: the triumph of God also comes through us.

Hear again Jesus stunning, amazing promise: “The one who believes in me will do God’s work and will do even greater works because I am returning to the Father.” Now Jesus empowers us.

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

Do you believe that? Do you believe that our church is empowered to do even greater works than the works done by Jesus? Jesus began his ministry by calling a group of ordinary people to be his disciples. And empowered those disciples. Still does. That’s the way Jesus works. Then and now.

We make a difference every time we gather – and often we don’t even realize how profound and life changing those times are for someone touched by our ministry.

William Willimon, a bishop in the Methodist church and professor at Duke University, tells the story of a time when he was called to a small rural church by the pastor to baptize a 12 year old boy – he arrived at the church and was met by the pastor standing on the steps with a small boy. He went into the service, preached a sermon on baptism, and gathered the congregation around the baptismal font. It was a great honor to have the Bishop preside at this baptism and after he went through the liturgy, he then asked Jeremy if he had anything to say to the congregation before he was baptised.

This very wise 12 year old responded, “Yes I do. I just want to say to all of you that I’m here today because of all of you. When my parents got divorced, I thought my world was over. But you stood by me. You told me the stories of Jesus. And I just want to say to you today thanks for what you did for me. I intend to make you proud as I’m going to try to live my life the way Jesus wants.” Willimon says, “It was for me one of

the most potent experiences of the power of God, surging through the church, to claim new life for Christian mission.”

Haven't we felt that same power right here when little Skylynn Velazquez was brought here by her parents, Alexis and Isaiah, her grandparents, Bill and Kristin Wood, and her great grandparents Bill Sr. and Paula Wood for the Sacrament of Baptism? Another potent experience of the power of God, right here surging through St. Paul's, as we claimed a new life into the Body of Christ, for Christian mission.

And about a month later – when the Mayrer family gathered in this place to celebrate John's life. John, confirmed here; his parents active in the life of this church: friends and family came together in this powerful place to mourn, to remember, to experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ, to hear the promise and to know, to feel, the promise as we gave thanks for John's life among us. There is power here, friends – people know it, feel it when they come. My prayer is that all of us feel it too.

Elaine Painter – director of Nutley Family Services Bureau – came into this sanctuary a week ago as we gathered your food donations for their pantry – she looked around and said, “I feel the power of love, of God in this place. It's here!” Honestly, that gave me goosebumps – and you know, she's right. There is power here. There is an energy bubbling here.

And when 30 nursery school children and their teachers sit right here on the floor for a story, there is both energy and power in abundance in this place.

“Those of you who believe in me will do even greater work than I have done.” Do you believe that?

It's good to be reminded by John 14 that the test of this faith, indeed its essence, is the work, the doing of the faith.

A pastor wrote, “I had been trying to get that church in gear for four years. It was like beating my head against a brick wall. Then there was one particular sermon – I really didn't intend to preach on the church's mission and our need to get involved. I had about given up actually – well, on Monday morning a woman, one of our most senior members called and said, “I didn't get a wink of sleep last night. I just couldn't get your sermon out of my mind.”

“My sermon?”

“Yep – your sermon. When you asked in this Sunday's sermon, “If this church disappeared from this town today, would anybody note the difference? I just couldn't get that out of my brain. I want you to know that I'm ready to work with you and make a difference in this town. When can you meet me at the church?”

The pastor reports, “Her efforts, spurred on by one little comment in my sermon, have given this church a new lease on life. We now have a food pantry, a clothes closet, Angel Tree – you name it. All because one person heard something mentioned in a sermon, heard her name called. Just one.”

Jesus says that we, despite all our sin and faults, will do some great works. Do you believe that? Do you believe you are empowered? Because you are.

Your assignment for the week, should you choose to accept it: ponder the same question, please: if this church disappeared from this town today, would anybody note the difference? And then, let's talk about it!

It does take some faith to believe what Jesus says about us: God is doing ever greater works through not-so-great, ordinary people like us.

But remember our Epistle lesson – written 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 – and when it is, it is always applied just to Jesus.

Yet, here it’s different: here “priest” is applied to those 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 – in their daily lives.

This is a big deal to claim for ordinary people like you and like me. We are a chosen race. We are the royal priesthood. We are a holy nation. We are God’s own people. Who me? Who, us? Yes. Us. You bet - each and every one of us.

What is to become of us?

Brothers and sisters, we are God’s great answer to what’s wrong in the world. We are God’s great, spirit-induced power surge into the world. Believe it!

And now, let’s go live like it!

Let the people say: Amen!

Amen!