

“Seeds of Growth”

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

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What happens to a group when its leader goes away? There's much speculation about Cuba right now. As Fidel Castro fails in health and hands the reins of power over to his brother, will Cuba be the same? Will it be different, and if so, in what way? There was similar speculation several years ago about Syria, as the older Assad passed away, and the younger Assad assumed control of this very ancient Middle Eastern country. Will there be any change in policy and international relationships, will there be anything new with a new leader?

What does happen to a group when its leader goes away? What happens when a family member passes on? Most people these days have wills that give directives about the dividing of property after death. If there is no will, there is usually a prescribed way to dissolve an estate that is set by the law of the land. There has to be, since the departure of a person always has at least a small, if not profound, degree of change upon those who gathered around that person in life for whatever reason.

What happened to the disciples as Jesus left their midst? How would things change for them after Jesus was crucified, resurrected, and then ascended into heaven? John's Gospel, unlike the others, gives us a goodbye speech from Jesus that lasts for five chapters. Jesus begins his last evening with his disciples by washing their feet, and that upsets them in various ways. Then Jesus speaks of leaving them, and of betrayal and denial and suffering and death. They sense something big is in the wind, and they aren't exactly sure what Jesus is trying to tell them, and they aren't quite sure they want to know what Jesus is trying to tell them.

That's why today's Gospel lesson, which is a portion of this goodbye speech, begins with Jesus assuring his disciples with the words, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Assurance. Jesus sees their anxiety and their furrowed brows. There are troubling times ahead of them, and the way will not always be clear for them. After all, when is life a breeze, with clear direction and not a care around? “Do not let your hearts be troubled.”

The leader is about to depart, and the followers will need to find their way without him right there in plain sight for guidance and instruction. Are the disciples ready for this? Are they confident and sure of themselves? Can they take on the world all by themselves?

Well, no, not quite. As a matter of fact, the disciples come off looking like students hit with an exam who slept through every class. Jesus tells them they know the way where he is going, and Thomas says, “No we don't!” Jesus tells them that they know

God because they have known and seen Jesus. Philip says, "Wait! I don't remember seeing God. When did we see God? Did I miss it? Show us God right now, and we'll be fine!"

If I had been Jesus at that point, I might have given all of them a big fat "F." Hadn't they caught on yet? Here they'd been up close and personal with Jesus all this time, and they hadn't tumbled to the fact that everything that Jesus does and is leads to God. They hadn't caught on that looking at Jesus was like looking through a window in heaven to see what God is like. So, what will happen to this bumbling bunch when Jesus does depart from their midst?

Jesus tells them "You will do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these...." Greater works than Jesus has done? This group that can't even find their way out of a theological paper bag?

But that's not all. In almost the same breath, Jesus tells them, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." Greater works than Jesus, and now the divine power of Jesus on command! But what does this mean?

There are loads of movies and TV shows that have some kind of villain trying to seize some form of the greatest power unleashed on earth. You know, the mad scientist who wants to take over the world. The Indiana Jones movies certainly play on that. An evil empire seeks the explosive power of the hidden ark of the covenant in order to cow every other power on earth. A self-serving scientist gone bad essentially sells her soul to try to seize the life and death force of the holy grail, and so forth. Indiana Jones has to risk life and limb to keep these magical forces in the hands of good and benevolent people, otherwise the world will be in trouble.

So when Jesus speaks of abilities to do greater works and to call upon heaven for requests, this can sound a little disturbing. Are these powers to be used in some medieval understanding of blind power and unchecked greed? Does this mean something like whoever holds the genie's lamp can direct the genie to do anything at all, and the genie must simply obey? Does this reduce the teachings and the ministry of Jesus to chanted spells and incantations? What is it that Jesus means by these things? And besides, I'm not sure I want the likes of floundering Thomas and flunking Philip to have responsibility for the work of God in this world!

Here's the thing: these disciples have been, not in the presence of Harry Potter's teachers at Hogwarts school, learning how to wave a wand the right way or chant a spell just right, they have been in the presence of God in Jesus, and this God is relational and loving and alongside. This God will do things that are in accord with God's way, not as the blind servant of a human master. These disciples have had the chance to make mistakes and to see and feel forgiveness and mercy. These disciples have seen what really angers God as they have seen Jesus flare at rich and powerful people who can't

get enough of their riches and power, even if it means stepping all over voiceless people to chase their insatiable wants. Yes, they have seen the anger and justice of God in Jesus. They have seen the steadfast nature of God as Jesus has stood up for people condemned by society, even if it means risking condemnation upon himself.

Now they are to walk in the same way as Jesus. Jesus has shown them the way to find God, and the way to find God's quality of life in this world. If they follow in the path blazed by Jesus, they will find their way to God.

And the part about asking for things in the name of Jesus in order to get them? Again, there is nothing magical about praying in Jesus' name. The idea behind this is, can you pray in a way that pulls you into consideration of how Jesus would offer a request? If you use Jesus' name as authorization for your prayers to God, this implies that you know Christ, you abide in Christ, and you make these requests from your relationship with Christ rather than from a selfish and self-promoting value system. To pray in the name of Jesus Christ means that you are thoughtful about your prayers, not capricious, just as God is thoughtful and not capricious. It means you pray about what to pray. It means you want to adopt the perspective of Jesus Christ as you seek the will of God in your prayers.

So does this mean that the disciples of Jesus can truly become like Jesus, and do even greater works that Jesus was able to accomplish in his brief ministry on earth?

Look at the example of Stephen. We see his martyr's death in our lesson from Acts today. He has boldly spoken offensive but much needed words to the crowd, and they take up stones to kill him for it. Ironically, he has a vision of heaven in the midst of his death, and those who kill him are poisoned by their hatred and death-dealing. It becomes clear that those who are truly and spiritually dead are those who must kill Stephen, while Stephen rises into a new and peace-filled life. Is Stephen able to do greater things? His certainty of God's presence and of God's victory over all the ancient wrongs of the world that distort human life and rob it of joy allow him to have a greatness that his killers cannot begin to see. Stephen rises above them with a serenity that prays for the well-being and the forgiveness of all those who wish him to die by a violent and painful death.

It is a long journey to follow the Way of Jesus Christ. If the way is not always clear to you, remember Thomas, and Philip, and all those other disciples scratching their heads as Jesus tells them he is about to leave them. But you see, he never really left them! Just two verses after today's lesson ends, we hear Jesus assuring his disciples, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

You are not alone. And you are asked to be different from the rest of the world in the way that Jesus is different, seeing greatness in gentleness, seeing courage in unpopular truth, seeing power in love, seeing forgiveness possible for the unforgivable.

So travel well on the way of Jesus Christ through this world. May your sojourn bring you truth, life, and the very presence of our loving God for all eternity. Amen.