

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 7, 2023

Greater Works

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“...the one who believes in me will also do...greater works than these...”¹
“Greater works than these,” that phrase makes my Lutheran heart run cold. As if we human beings need any extra incentive or opening to make everything about us! We will do greater works than Jesus did...what an opportunity to really feed our egos! And (bonus!) we also get to judge our works and the works of others to determine what’s “greater” and what’s not. What an excellent verse for humans to cling to and use with abandon!

Then there’s the whole slippery slope that this potentially opens up towards works righteousness. If Jesus is comparing and contrasting works here in John, then of course we can do it in the here and now! And if Jesus uses the word “greater” that must mean there’s something to earn, right? And Jesus has, quite literally, just finished a teaching about getting to heaven. Sure, he says he is the only way to the Father, but surely salvation has to do with these “greater works” that we’re meant to do, right?

Clearly, a casual reading of this text can send us down some troubling paths. So, let’s take a deeper look at what’s going on here. If we drill down we will quickly discover that it isn’t the opportunity we might think at first blush! Especially if we focus on what “works” it is that Jesus is referencing here. What does the author of this Gospel mean by the works of Jesus?

It's easy to assume that the works being referenced are the miracles that Jesus performed. But the author of John typically uses a different word for those, not even talking about “miracles” the way Matthew, Mark, and Luke do. Rather, John’s author prefers the term “signs” when referencing acts of divine power. That’s even how the first miracle was explained in John 2:11, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”

¹ John 14:12 (NRSVUE)

So, the works generally aren't the "signs" or miracles of Jesus. While there are a couple of instances where Jesus talks about the "works" the Father accomplishes through him, most "works" don't seem to reference miracles. And thank goodness for that! I don't know about you but feeding 5,000 people with a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread is well beyond my abilities! Let alone walking on water, turning water into wine, healing people, and raising the dead!

What then are these works that Jesus expects us to do? John 6:29 gives us a fruitful avenue to explore: "Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'" Let's also remember John 4:34, "Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'" From these two verses I understand that "works" in John's Gospel generally have to do with belief and the will of God.

This even plays out in the few instances where Jesus does talk about his miracles as "works." Jesus says he is doing the will of God during his work with the man born blind in John 9: "Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'"² Now, what's the work of God for that man in John 9? The restoration of his sight? That was part of it, true. But I understand the main "work" in that encounter to be the forming of relationship between that man and God (through Jesus) and the creation of community that occurs once he is driven out. From this perspective I would argue that the main "work" that Jesus is interested in is proclamation.

The works of Jesus are focused on sharing the good news of God's steadfast love and amazing grace. The works of Jesus are concerned with relationship and community. The works to which we are called involve living out the loving and gracious will of our creator. Or, as I have said in the past, living as we were created to live: in the abundantly loving and gracious life found when walking the Way.

Now this is work we can do! We can bear witness to the love and grace of God at work in our lives. We can boldly proclaim that God's gracious love overwhelms and redeems every broken and messed up part of us and every broken and messed up part of the world too. We can challenge those people and powers that insist there are those who do not deserve God's grace and love.

² John 9:3

And here's where a word of warning is required. The world does not like to be challenged. The world loves the status quo of injustice, oppression, brokenness, judgement, inequality, and exclusion. The world will resist every effort to be redeemed. This brings me to our first lesson for today.

St. Stephen is proof that doing the works of God will put us in opposition to the world. What was Stephen's crime exactly? He proclaimed the love of God shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He argued that faith in Jesus was all that was necessary for salvation. He attacked the religious traditions and systems that kept people from right relationship with God. Stephen pointed out the brokenness of the people throughout history and their unwillingness to hear what God has been trying to communicate to them from the beginning. Stephen was proclaiming the good news, the Gospel...he was doing the works of God.

And what is the world's response to his proclamation? They cover their ears, shout him down, and rush forward to attack him. Ultimately, their response to being challenged to is kill the challenger. This is a scene that will play out many more times in our history; St. Stephen will be but the first of many martyrs whom the world will kill because of their bold and audacious proclamation.

Jesus came to show us how to live the abundant life that God made us to live. That is the work he performed. That is the work we are called into as well. Proclaiming to the world that love and grace are more important than anything else. Proclaiming that selfish desires and exclusionary relationships are not righteous.

Whether signs, works, or miracles, it all boils down to sharing the love of God. That's what we're called to proclaim. That's what we're called to live in and out of. That's how we're meant to live. That's what we're made for. Love. And here's the thing about love, it doesn't diminish...when it's shared from one to another it only grows. So of course, we're going to do greater works, love can only ever get greater! Amen.