

Growth in the Spirit of God

Text: John 14:7-17

Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2010

First Presbyterian Church, Ypsilanti, Michigan

The pages of both the Old and the New Testament are filled with promises, all sorts of promises: God's promises for meaning and life for you and me.

Especially in the New Testament there are scores of promises, many of them coming from Jesus himself:

- "I've come that you may have life, and that you may have it more abundantly."
- "Come unto me all you that do labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest."
- "Because I live, you will live also."
- "I will never leave you nor forsake you."
- "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon you."

Perhaps the most astonishing and extravagant promise Jesus ever gave is the one quoted from John's gospel, the 12th verse of the 14th chapter. "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will do the works that I do, and **greater** works than I have done will [you] do, because I go to the Father." Extravagant, almost breath taking, hard to believe. If this even hints at a truth, mustn't we admit that we have never really taken Jesus seriously? The least we have to confess is that we have been willing to settle for far less than Jesus intended for his followers.

Charles Schulz is one of my favorite theologians. He spoke volumes of meaning in those cartoons. In one series, he had Snoopy, that hound of heaven, thinking and talking about Woodstock, that would-be bird of paradise. Snoopy says, "**Someday, Woodstock is going to be a great eagle. He's going to soar 1,000 feet above the earth.**" About that time, Woodstock takes off, gets about 100 feet above the earth, but then soars down for awhile and begins to twirl around in all sorts of dervish movements. And Snoopy has second thoughts. He says, "**Well, maybe just 100 feet above the earth.**" And about that time, Woodstock plummets to the earth, lies on his back half dazed, and Snoopy concludes, "**Maybe he'll just be one of those eagles that walks around on earth.**"

Isn't it amazing how quickly we settle for less than is promised and far less than is possible? So what have we in this promise of Jesus: "**Greater things than I have done will you do because I go to the Father.**" The promise becomes even more pronounced when we remember who said it. Jesus said it. The One who *loved* and *forgave* and *washed* his disciples' feet; the One who took little children in his arms and

blessed them; the One who *healed* the sick, made the blind *to see*, the lame *to walk*, the deaf *to hear*; the One who *calmed* a raging sea and then *gave confidence* and *ease* to his frightened disciples; the One who hung on a cross and *gave* his life for the salvation of the world; the One who *finished* everything God gave Him to do and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. This is the One who said, "Greater things than I have done will you do because I go to the Father." So, can we believe it? Can we even begin to think it's possible? Let me offer two affirmations, which, if we will claim, even *begin* to claim, will make this promise something that we may be able to appropriate.

The first affirmation is this: *You are more than you think you are.* Now let me say that again. You are more than you think you are.

Now that's not easy to appropriate. I heard a story recently about an old bachelor and an old maid who became interested in each other. They'd lived alone for many years. He was very shy and not able to express his feelings very well, not willing, most of the time, to express any emotion. But he really fell in love with this woman, and finally one day his emotions got the best of him. He was no longer in control, and without even knowing what he was doing, he said, "Why don't we get married?" She threw her arms up and said, "It's a wonderful idea, but who in the world would have us?"

How easy it is for us to begin to slink into that kind of self-understanding! When I begin to feel blue, when the sky of my life begins to be clouded with dark gloom because I'm thinking too much of my failure, I'm thinking too much of my limitation, I become too involved in how I have failed rather than what I have done. When that begins to happen to me, I try to remember the eighth psalm. Do you remember that psalm?

"When I consider the heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars which You have ordained, what are persons that You are mindful of them? Human kind that you take note of them? For you've made us a little lower than the angels."

"You've made us a little lower than the angels and crowned us with glory and honor." If I could put that psalm together with this promise of Jesus--"GREATER things than I have done will you do because I go to the Father" if I could put those two things together, I can know that I am more than I think I am. But you keep insisting, "How can that be? How can I believe that I am more than I think I am?" Well, you have it on the authority of God himself. That's what this Book is all about. It's on almost every page of the Book. You are important to God. That means that you are an unrepeatable miracle of God. That means that there is a place in God's heart that only you can fill. Now let me say that again. There is a place in God's heart that only you can fill. "Greater things than I have done will you do," said Jesus. "Because I go to the Father." That means at the least: **you are more than you think you are.**

It also suggests another affirmation, an affirmation that will help us appropriate this promise of Jesus. Listen. *There is something you can be and do but will never be and do apart from Jesus Christ.* Did you get that? There is something you can be and do but will never be and do apart from Jesus Christ.

At first the disciples didn't see this. They didn't see how there is something they could be and do apart from Jesus. They didn't see that in many ways they were already doing it. Philip reveals that they didn't see it when he asks Jesus to show him Jesus' father and Jesus replies: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The disciples have already seen God in Jesus, but they had yet to notice. They didn't have eyes to see. So, Jesus makes them another promise: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because **he abides with you, and he will be in you**" [John 14:16-17]. This Spirit of truth, comes along side you, and lives with you, like Jesus walking along the Emmaus road inviting you into a deeper more powerful relationship.

On Pentecost we usually read the story in Acts chapter 2 where the spirit comes to each disciple as a tongue of flame. We hear grand stories about visions and talking in tongues and signs of wonder, but here in John's Gospel we learn about the subtle side of the spirit—the shyest member of the trinity. We don't often see the spirit: the spirit is like the wind, or appears like a dove, or like tongues of fire. But we always see the results of the Holy Spirit.

Many people question if the Holy Spirit is at work in the world today. Put on some different eyes and see:

- The claiming of an infant in baptism;
- The faith of a spouse in the loss of a loved one;
- The building of a Habitat for Humanity home;
- 6,000 youth traveling across sea and land to worship God in central Indiana in the 90 degree heat;
- Strangers assisting in areas of a natural disaster;
- The grace exhibited to one another after a difficult discussion;
- And the ability to awaken to see a new day...

It's being said that Christians today live in the age of the spirit and that we need to become pneumanauts, "sailors of the spirit". I'm pleased to say that the session went sailing last Monday night. I saw our sails raised when they approved beginning a community garden on our property to feed our neighbors--a garden, a symbol of life, a sign of the Spirit of truth, out there in the backyard--I saw sail fill when Amanda Moore asked to be endorsed to be a mission worker for the PC(USA); I heard the spirit in prayers of care and joy. I felt the spirit when you all so lovingly fed Sheri and me when she got home from the hospital.

The Holy Spirit is at work in you and in me, in us. **For the Spirit is at work wherever there is community.** The Spirit is at work wherever there is gratitude. The Spirit is at work wherever there are "sighs too deep for words." The Spirit is at work wherever there is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," for these are the fruits of the Spirit. The Spirit is at work as the "whole creation groans in labor pains" birthing new life. The Spirit is at work wherever "young people prophesy" against injustice and "see visions" of hope and wherever elders still "dream dreams" of a better world.

Let me challenge you to go forth today and to return next week with a story of where you've felt the spirit or seen the fruit of the Spirit. And remember, as you set sail from your harbor of comfort that Jesus promised: **"GREATER things than I have done will you do because I go to the Father."** Would you claim that promise? After all, "You are more than you think you are, and there is something you can be and do but will never be and do apart from Jesus Christ.

If you lay hold of those affirmations, you can begin to claim the promise. God bless you on your journey of claiming that promise for He abides in you and you in Him.