

“Living Greater Things than These”
January 18, 2009

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
John 1:43-51

More than ten years ago, while I was still practicing law but after I had experienced an unexpected and inexplicable call to ministry, I did what a good many of you have done at one time or another in your lives. I went church shopping.

Now, I need to say that, except when it comes to shopping for food, I’m a terrible shopper. Especially in a mall, but in other places, too, I get irritable and impatient very easily ... and that’s why Chey and I decided *years* ago that it’s best, whenever I needed clothes or shoes or anything else unrelated to food, for me to go shopping by myself.

So I guess it shouldn’t have been surprising that church shopping proved to be a little difficult. I shopped some of the churches in the town where we lived, and even though I went many times to one of them, nothing seemed like a good fit. And, sure enough, right on cue, I got irritable and impatient, and I gave up ... for a time.

After a while, I decided to try again, and that’s when I found the church that did fit. The people were friendly, the architecture was simple and beautiful, the music was lovely, and the preaching reached out and grabbed me. I had found my church home.

This church came with two ministers, a husband and wife team. He was welcoming and playful; she was more than a little intimidating. She was a gifted, prophetic preacher whose message frequently knocked my socks off; he was a gifted teacher of prayer. The two of them together offered what I needed at the right place and the right time.

But then, just two short years after my successful church shopping adventure, that ministry twosome had the nerve to announce that they were leaving the church I had come to call home. I was stunned; I was dismayed. And after they left, the pain of losing them as my ministers was sharp and deep. I missed them both terribly, and I especially missed the challenge and nurture of her preaching.

A few years later, when I was called to this church, that particular experience of loss became a great gift of grace. I came to see the gift within that loss as my relationship with this congregation grew. I came to see the gift as I realized my loss had taught me something about the kind of loss and grief this congregation must have experienced when its long-time minister retired in 2004. Having lost and grieved my own ministers not so long before, I was better able to appreciate and honor the loss and grief that many of you had experienced when David McCracken left.

Over time, I’ve realized that losing my ministers had also provided a different kind of gift, the gift of a cautionary tale, a warning of the significant perils for any minister who follows a long-term pastorate. The warning, the caution, the alert about potentially treacherous waters for a new minister came from my own struggle with the interim minister who followed “my” ministers. I’m embarrassed to admit it, but for months after she arrived, that new minister, as far as *I* was concerned, could do nothing, absolutely *nothing* right. Not a single thing. (Clearly, this was *not* one of the more shining, charitable, and loving moments in my life!)

Her welcome, her prayers, her reading, her preaching ... I was open to none of it. What was happening, of course, was that, for me, that minister had one fatal flaw, one irredeemable shortcoming, and it was this: she wasn't the ministers who had moved on. She wasn't the ministers I had lost.

Fortunately, God's grace falls on the crabby as well as the cheerful, and I was, finally, able to realize what was going on and why I was reacting the way I was. I tried to stop blaming her for not being someone else. (Real generous of me, don't you think?) And I prayed and I worked to come to peace with all the changes that had come after "my" ministers had left.

As the peace I sought started to take hold, I became at least a little more capable of being charitable, gracious, and not quite so full of myself. Despite that, though, something kept rankling; something about the new minister's sermons kept troubling me. I tried to pay close attention when the rankling and the troubling came, because I knew it was possible that I was simply slipping back into being mad at her for not being the ministers who had moved on.

As I listened over the weeks and then months, I realized that the rankling and troubling came when the Sunday morning scripture readings put a challenge before us, when the readings issued a clear call to take on the cost, the hard work, the cross of a deeply faithful life. On those (frequent) Sunday mornings, the new minister would tell us in a variety of ways that no one could really do what we were being asked to do. The sermons on those mornings would often include the message that what God was asking us through scripture was too hard, that we should realize that it wasn't really possible for you or me or anyone else to follow where God was leading.

It seemed to me that she was selling us short – or, in truth, selling God within us short. It seemed as if she wasn't taking seriously Jesus' expectation that we really can pick up our cross and follow him, that we really can lose our lives in love and service and so gain them. She kept seeming to invite us to set our sights lower and to dream more practical dreams.

In the years since, I've gone to seminary and studied the Bible and the Christian tradition. I've been ordained into the Christian ministry, and I've been installed as the minister and pastor of this congregation. In the years since, I've also experienced more losses, more disappointments, more failures ... and more of my own limitations. So now, when I encounter those challenging texts for Sunday mornings, I may have a few more doubts about my and our human ability to live those challenges. Now, when I hear the Word of God calling me and calling this congregation to follow Jesus – to risk our lives, our very selves, by trusting the power of love and forgiveness over hate and violence and to risk seeking protection from the grace and blessing of God instead of the false strength of military might and the accumulation of things, things, and more things – now, when I hear that kind of call, I'm a bit more mindful of how *hard* it can be to say, "Yes, I will follow you."

And I start to wonder if maybe that preacher who troubled me was right, after all; I start to wonder if God has given us a vision for our lives that is too much, too hard, too great. But then something comes along, offering a reminder that the Holy One does not ask great things of us out of an ill-informed opinion of our abilities. Something comes along, offering a reminder that the Holy One asks great things of us precisely because He or She knows *exactly* who we are and *exactly* what we can and cannot do.

Something comes along, in other words, like this morning's poetry and story, in which we hear that we are searched and known and seen by God and by Jesus. Something comes along that tells us we are thoroughly, completely, intimately seen and known by God and by Jesus. Something comes along and tells us that it is *because* the Holy One sees and knows who we are, that God in Christ, God in and through Jesus' ministry, calls us to do extraordinary things. Knowing who we are, knowing our weaknesses, knowing our wounds and doubts, our fears and timidity – having no illusion about who or what we are – God in Christ, God in and through Jesus, calls us to pick up our crosses, to lose our lives so that we might gain them, to love our enemies, and to trust that God will provide what we need.

In this morning's reading and later in the Gospel of John, we hear that God in Christ, God in and through Jesus, tells Jesus' disciples, then and now, that we will see and do greater things than Jesus. We hear that we whom God searches and knows, we whom God has seen before we were born and whom God can see clearly from any distance . . . we whose very words and thoughts are known to God, *we* will do and live greater things than Jesus did in his ministry of courage, healing, love, and faithfulness. We're not told that we'll offer some pale imitation. We're not even told we'll offer some imitation in vibrant colors. We're not told that we'll offer or live any *imitation* at all. We are told we will do greater things, we will live greater things, period.

And just like those men and women who listened to Jesus so many years ago and heard him say that they would do greater things than he, we're given the choice of whether we'll believe this wild teaching, if, that is, we're willing to pay any attention to it at all. We're given the choice of whether we will risk believing and then trying to live this absurd promise. We're given the choice of whether we will follow Jesus on our own roads of vulnerability, love, forgiveness, faithfulness, and courage, even though we know just where Jesus' road led him – to betrayal, abandonment, derision, and death on a cross.

If you follow me, you will see greater things than these, he says to his disciples. If you follow me, you will do greater works than those I have done, he says to his disciples. If you follow me, you will live greater things – greater healing, greater love, and greater service – he says to you and to me.

When I am tired, overwhelmed, or just plain ol' lazy, I can long for that message I heard several years ago in my home church. I can long to hear that, of course, no one can *really* do what God in Christ asked and asks. I long to hear that we shouldn't take this call to surrender our lives in loving service too seriously. I long to hear that maybe God is only asking for a part-time commitment.

But then two things happen. One is that I am reminded, in prayer, in laughter, in a moment of grace, that "greater," as in seeing and doing "greater things," does not mean *spectacular*. I am reminded that the "greater things" Jesus says we will see and do include the simple, utterly transformative actions of forgiving someone who has hurt us, of listening – attentively and with an open heart – to someone who seems strange or foreign or threatening. I am reminded that another of those "greater things" can be giving freely of our time and whatever treasure we have, so that a few more people can have enough to eat, a roof over their heads, and a chance to live free from the violence of war. I am reminded that greater things can include the simple, radical act of trusting the abundant grace of God to provide what we need when our business slows down, when we

or our children are laid off, or when the financial safety net we thought we had seems to have been swept out to sea and lost.

What also happens when I start thinking that living fully and faithfully in response to God's call is just too hard, is that a particular Word of God comes through ancient writings and through a whisper in my heart. I invite you to listen with me and see if you can hear that whisper, too. Listen, and discover what the Word is saying to you and to me:

I have searched you and known you. I know all your ways, and it is you whom I call to live fully in my grace, blessing, and truth.

You are wonderfully made, and I know you as you truly are. I ask you to join me, in healing, blessing, and loving the world in ways that no one has yet seen. I ask you to join me, to live a life of abundance – a life of love, service, and joy that you can't even imagine.

The invitation is daunting, maybe even too wild to consider. But if we're tempted to ignore the invitation as too much – too demanding, too risky, or just too ridiculous to consider – the poet who gave us Psalm 139 offers another, simple reminder. That ancient poet reminds us that the Holy One who issues this wild invitation is the One who will stay with us to the end, issuing invitation after invitation after invitation, until we finally say, "Yes."

Trusting in the One who knows us in all our brokenness and beauty, let us say, "Yes," and discover what great things we are called to live.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
January 18, 2009