11-14/15-20 “Greater Than: Possibility > Status Quo” Rev. Amy Haines

John 14:11-14 Stewardship

“Don’t be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me.” (JN 14.1 CEB)

Jesus spoke words of reassurance and encouragement to his disciples the night before his death, inviting them to trust him and follow him into a future greater than anything they could imagine.

His words still reach out to us here today. God is greater than our struggles. God is greater than our hopes.

As we build a life on a firm foundation of faith, God also calls us to a life that is greater than what we can imagine. A life that is open to God’s ways, invests in God’s ways, builds on God’s ways.

As we listen to Jesus’ words from long ago, may we hear the hope of possibility in his words for us today. …John 14:11-14…

What have you done this year that you never expected to do?

Virtual schooling? Learning how to zoom? Cancelling vacation plans? Using ordinary elements for at-home communion?

I never expected to plan Holy Week services for an online only audience.

I never expected to offer a weekly online devotional.

I never expected I would encourage others to wear masks at church.

I never expected I would be supporting my children doing school at home.

My personality is such that I like to take things slow, think through the details and reflect on what makes the most logical sense before I try something new. That is true for personal investments, planning vacation, and moving forward in ministry.

I know I frustrate others with my pace. I know that at times I appear too cautious. I know that spontaneity is a constant work in progress. Yet that is who I am.

So this year has also challenged me to move from what is comfortable to what is possible.

This year has challenged me to try new things, to step out of my comfort zone, and to not beat myself up over something tried that didn’t work.

Some things truly are only effective for a season, like our outside gatherings in June worked for only two sessions. Other things become new traditions, like our Halloween trunk or treat.

This year has challenged the church universal to move from what is comfortable to what is possible. In many areas of our nation and our world, worship remains fully virtual. Relationships have had to be formed outside the walls of a church building. People of faith have had to move from the comfort of being together on Sunday mornings to the possibilities of faith formation at home.

None of this is easy.

Especially because the seven last words of the church remains “We’ve never done it that way before.” We like what is familiar, unable to imagine something new. We like our traditions,

even if our traditions are no longer life-giving. We hold on to the status quo, because possibility often means change. And change is not something we do easily, especially in the church.

Hear me now, brothers and sisters, I am **not** saying that we throw everything out the window and start over. Tradition has its place, if it connects us to those who have gone before us,

reminding us of their faith that has been passed down to us in order to pass it down to others.

Tradition can reassure us when everything else has changed in life, if it remains life giving.

When our worship went fully virtual earlier this year, many of you commented that live streaming from the sanctuary was reassuring to you, even as we pared down the service, as it brought a bit of the familiar into the uncertainty of the shutdown.

Yet now that we are in person as well as online for worship, many of you have also commented that without singing hymns together in worship, something is missing in worship for you. That is why you choose to remain at home. As a musician who is moved by music, I understand that sentiment! I am constantly struggling with possibilities for participatory worship under COVID restrictions. I, too, yearn for the day that we can sing and worship fully together again.

I also know that the church of the future will be different than the church of the past.

The church in January of 2022 I expect to be different than the church of January 2020.

Our challenge will be, will we be open to the possibilities for that future church, or try to channel it into the way it always was? Will we stick with the status quo, or be open to what could be, led by the Holy Spirit?

Please know that our fear of the unknown, especially an unknown future, is nothing new.

Abraham and Sarah set out following God with trust and uncertainty. The Israelites left slavery in Egypt not knowing how long their wilderness wanderings would take them, so constantly complained to go back to what was familiar rather than move forward trusting the God who guided them. Even Jesus’ closest disciples struggled to move from status quo to possibility,

to move from their expectations to a new reality.

Today’s passage is part of Jesus’ final discourse in the Gospel of John, Jesus’ parting words to his faithful disciples. Only they didn’t know that this was Jesus’ final night on earth. They didn’t understand Jesus was training them to take over his ministry.

They wanted to follow him wherever Jesus was going. They expected Jesus to lead them to an overthrow of Rome. They didn’t comprehend that Jesus’ journey would soon take him to the cross.

Daily Jesus lived what Isaiah proclaimed: Thus says the Lord… “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (43:19 ESV)

Every day Jesus taught God’s ways of grace and compassion, of mercy and accountability,

of hope and community. Every day Jesus shared God’s welcome and love to all he encountered.

Every time Jesus healed and cast out demons he offered new life to those cut off from community. Every time Jesus opened the Scriptures he challenged movement from rules to relationships. Every time Jesus called ordinary men and women to follow him he expanded the family of God.

Jesus brought glimpses of God’s mighty kingdom here to earth!

Yet even his closest companions struggled to trust, to see, to believe and to live what Jesus showed and shared.

In the 14th chapter of John, Jesus’ disciples were honest with their struggles. When Jesus invited the disciples to trust him as he prepared the way to eternal life, Thomas struggled to see the road ahead. “Lord, we do not know where you are going.” When Jesus invited the disciples to see God through Jesus, Philipp still said show us. “Show us the Father.”

In what ways do we struggle to see and to listen, to trust in and to follow Jesus?

Do we believe in the promises of God that we are not alone, that we are forgiven, that we are freed by faith for new life?

Do we believe in the promises of Jesus spoken in these verses? Not only will we do the works of Jesus, but we will do works greater than Jesus? If we ask in the name of Jesus, he will do whatever we ask if it aligns with God’s ways?

These promises seem impossible to our ears! They are hard to imagine. They are not our current experience. They seem only wishful thinking to our 21st century mindset.

And yet, if we read the New Testament stories, if we look back over church history, if we consider who shared Jesus with us, these promises are not as unrealistic as we first imagine.

Jesus’ work and ministry, Jesus’ love and grace, Jesus’ power to transform the world has continued down through the generations.

A ragtag group of uneducated disciples began a movement that changed a king just a few hundred years later. While there has been much the church needs to lament over, from the violence of the Crusades to our struggle with racism, there are many ways the church has changed society. Our faith ancestors in the Methodist tradition founded hospitals and schools

and empowered laypeople to preach and teach and lead. Men like Billy Graham utilized the technology on hand to broadcast God’s Word to the world. Women like Nadia Boltz Weber bring God’s grace in the vernacular to the forgotten of our day.

Now it is our turn, to listen to, believe in and respond to Jesus’ words of power and possibility.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, how are we called to continue Jesus’ mission and ministry

in our world, in our community, through our congregation? How are we to live by faith not only in the miraculous but also in the mundane of daily living? How do we invest in our faith in tangible ways, not only through our prayers and presence, but also through our finances and our skills?

Earlier this fall one of my mentors, Rebekah Simon Peter, challenged a group of us to move from faith IN Jesus to the faith OF Jesus.

According to certain scholars,

“Many newer translations of the Bible render certain verses written by the apostle Paul to say that we are to live by our faith IN Christ—whereas the earlier King James Version translated these to say that we must have the faith OF Christ.”

--Creating a Culture of Renewal Track 3 page 2

What is that difference for you, between faith IN and the faith OF Jesus? To me, that difference moves us from assent to action, from what we believe to how we live out that belief.

What would it look like for all of us to move from faith IN Jesus to the faith OF Jesus? We would not only be transformed by what we believe, we would also begin to transform the world around us by how we live.

We would live into the promise of Jesus in John 14 when we declared,

 **“**Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing,

and they will do even greater things than these.” (v12)

God is calling us to ministry greater than our expectations.

God is calling us to ministry greater than our experiences.

God is calling us to ministry greater than our struggles.

God is calling us to ministry greater than our own power.

What would it look like for us to move from status quo to possibility, from complacency to vision, from fear to faith?

Maybe ministry would look like a community valuing every generation. Not only children and youth, but also young adults and senior adults.

Maybe ministry would look like robust multi-generational relationships that expand the family of God.

Maybe ministry would look like relationships that lessen loneliness and enhance connection,

even amid the restrictions of COVID, even online.

Maybe ministry would look like learning patience and perseverance from our senior adult populations, who have seen and experienced much more than a global pandemic. How has their journeys of faith been challenged then strengthened by world events, personal celebrations and shared struggles?

How do we move forward into what could be?

How do we move outside these walls to the community around us?

We move forward in trust. We move forward in faith. We move forward open to possibility.

We move forward investing in intentional ways.

Today is our Commitment Sunday, the one Sunday a year in which we ask our members and active constituents for an intentional financial commitment for the year ahead.

(1030)

If you are joining us online today and are not active in our congregation, will you pray for those who are active and the commitments they make this day? Will you support your local congregation in their mission and ministry?

There are many ways that we invest in the work of Christ in our world—through our prayers and presence, our time and energy, our skills and finances, our verbal witness and physical service.

Are you willing to invest in possibilities? Are you willing to invest in prayer? Are you willing to invest in relationships with others, of all ages, of all generations? Are you willing to invest financially in the work of God through First UMC of Springboro?

When we respond to Christ’s love in intentional ways we invest in the possibilities to make a difference in the world around us. When we respond to Christ’s call in intentional ways

we show the world around us why Jesus is our firm foundation.

2021 calls us to be different. 2021 needs us to be different.

We cannot go back to the ways church has always been. Instead, we are invited to move into a new future, new ways of carrying out Jesus’ works in this world, trusting that Jesus is already there ahead of us.

God is greater than our struggles. God is greater than our hopes. And God calls us to a life that is greater than what we can imagine.

May we hear and respond to God’s presence and promises and call, living into the possibilities that await us as we live the faith OF Jesus.

Amen.