Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 14, 2017

Neal MacPherson

“GREATER THINGS THAN THESE” John 14:1–14

 “Believe me that I am in the Father and the

 Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe

 me because of the works themselves. Very

 truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me

 will do the works that I do and, in fact, will

 do greater works than these, because I am

 going to the Father. I will do whatever you

 ask in my name, so that the Father may be

 glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask

 me for anything, I will do it. —John 14:11–14

 This is a remarkable passage of scripture, for it is the only scripture I know that declares that the followers of Jesus will do greater works than Jesus himself did! It’s an amazing testimony to the power of believing in Jesus, that those who believe in him (perhaps we who are gathered here today?) might accomplish even greater works than he accomplished himself!

 Just think of the works Jesus accomplished in John’s Gospel. Jesus turned water into wine. He healed a lame man on the Sabbath. He brought about the restoration of sight to a man born blind. He fed 5,000 people through the blessing of five barley loaves and two fish. He raised Lazarus from the dead. His followers are going to do greater works than these? Amazing, indeed!

 So began my reflection on these words from John’s Gospel this past Monday. I realized that today would be Mother’s Day, or the Festival of the Christian Home as a number of Protestant denominations has designated it, and I didn’t want to ignore its significance for many in our congregation. And then I remembered that today after the service we are going to dedicate Room 206 to the memory of Yeiko Mizobe So, a woman, a mother figure to all the women and children she served, and a adoptive mother to her daughter, Esther Atsuko Mitsunaga.

 Yeiko So’s story is remarkable. Born in 1865 to a Japanese family in Fukuoka City, Japan, and raised there, Yeiko Mizobe at the age of twenty-three married Isojiro So. Tragically, after six months of marriage, her husband died after a brief illness. A young widow, Mrs. So was then converted to Christianity through the missionary work of the Reverend and Mrs. O. H. Gulick, for whom Gulick Avenue here in Honolulu was named. Following her conversion, Yeiko So decided to give her life to Christian ministry and she began studies at the Kobe Women’s Seminary in 1891. She worked with the Gulicks in the Kobe area. The Gulicks returned to Hawai‘i in 1894 to assist with the integration of Japanese immigrants into the social life of the islands. In their wisdom, they saw the need for someone of Japanese ancestry from Japan to come to Hawai‘i as a missionary to work alongside them in this task. (We think of the missionaries coming to the island from New England, but not all came from the East. Some came from the West as well!) And so it was, following the recommendation of the Gulicks, that the Hawaiian Board of Missions invited Mrs. So to come to work alongside them in their ministry. She spent time touring the islands and in Honolulu she saw that there was a need for a women’s rescue home that would provide shelter and protection for picture brides who were being abused by their husbands. With the assistance of the Japanese Christian Church, now Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, the shelter home was established and overseen by Mrs. So.

In the ten years of its existence, the Japanese Women’s Home sheltered over 700 women and their children. The home not only sheltered these women; it also provided a broad spectrum of social services, enabling the women to return to their marriages stronger and more self-assured, or embark to a new life on their own. After ten years, the territorial immigration center took responsibility for the work Mrs. So had begun.

 Mrs. So then saw the plight of neglected children in Honolulu, many of whom were homeless and wandering the streets, and with the assistance of the Nu‘uanu Congregational Church’s Women’s Society, she founded a home for them in 1905. The home provided care for the homeless, neglected children and also for the children of working mothers. Other churches and charitable organizations also supported the home. Over the years, 369 children were served. Mrs. So retired from active work in 1931 and died the next year. She was survived by a daughter Esther, whom she adopted from her children’s home. Many here today remember Esther, who served as our church’s organist.

 The story of Mrs. So has moved us deeply as we have explored her life and its impact on the lives of those whom she served in the name of Jesus Christ. Indeed, her life and ministry honors the words of Jesus in John’s Gospel: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

 Mrs. So’s work was not the only work of our congregation in its beginning years, in the years when it did not have many members. Also, at the turn of the century, the church established the Japanese Boarding School, a dormitory for students. Our church was the mainstay of the Charity Hospital, a clinic serving the unfortunate and sick. Charity Hospital was the precursor of the hospital we know today as the Kuakini Medical Center. Our church, along with others, also established the Japanese Y.M.C.A., now the Nu‘uanu Y.M.C.A.

 “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these. . .” In the history of our congregation, the focus was on mission. The focus was the theme of the parable of the Last Judgment from the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 25, you know, the one that speaks of ministering to Christ himself as his followers feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. As was mentioned in our Lectionary Study last Wednesday, these days it is as if our society is repealing and replacing Matthew 25, so caught up are we in the culture of selfishness! As a society, we have lost the commitment to serve the common good.

 The mission of the church in our world is now more crucial than ever beore. We churches, who seek to do the works of Jesus in our world, have to be focused on mission rather than survival. We need to discern what is needed in our community and what God wills for our world. We need to intersect with those needs and that will. Our mission does not have to be done all by ourselves. We can link with other churches, temples, organizations such as FACE, and people of goodwill everywhere to do *missio dei*, the mission of God in our world.

 Jesus says that our works can be greater than his. Mrs. So proved that to be true. We have such a rich history as a congregation. Now it is our time to do the greater works to which Jesus calls us. Inspired by our own congregation’s past, and the witness of Yeiko So and many, many others, may God grant us the courage and grace so to do. Amen.