

False greatness and true greatness
(Joel 2:23-32 / Psalm 65 / 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 / Luke 18:9-14)

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Have you ever been in the presence of someone great? I mean: have you ever been right in front of, right in the presence of, someone who you know to be great?

This is probably not very common because there are not a lot of really great people around today. Oh, there are lots of celebrities: people whom you see on TV, or read about in the paper. But, you know the comments that I hear from people who come into the presence of people like that:

- oh, he's a lot fatter than he looks on TV, or
- she's so much shorter than I thought she was, or
- or, as happened with a well-known children's performer that my wife and I saw, we thought: my what an unpleasant person!

But, when you're in the presence of someone great, these are not the first things that you think about. Rather, you tend just to stare or wonder. There is something almost inexplicable about such a person.

I remember being in the presence of a truly great leader once. He happened to be a very highly respected Christian leader, world-renowned. Though he was speaking to a large group of people, afterwards there was an opportunity to greet him: he was not only highly respected but very gracious. I stood in line to greet him, formulating questions that I wanted to ask him. But, when I finally got to him, he looked at me with penetrating eyes, eyes filled with love, and I could only stammer out: "thank you very much for being here". And I walked away with my head down.

I don't know what happened. It wasn't as if I had forgotten what I wanted to say: it was all there. It was something about his presence and the way he looked at me: it was as if he looked right through me. And it wasn't as if I was a horrible person with a lot to hide and he had discovered me out: it was that everything that I was somehow paled into insignificance right there.

Being in the presence of someone who is truly great does that: it puts you into perspective in relation to greatness. When you are in the presence of someone who is truly great, someone who causes you to be in awe, your natural inclination is not to trot out all of your achievements, all of your fine attributes, and to exalt yourself. If you were in the presence of the Queen, you would hardly begin to say: Hey, Queen, you think you're so great: look at me and all I've done!

Well, that might happen today, in fact, but it would never have happened in an earlier day. The natural attitude of a person in a former day was not even to be able lift one's eyes in the presence of the Sovereign, unless the sovereign graciously called you forward and asked you to look up. In cultures all around the world, to run up to the throne, to exalt one's self in front of the king, was an affront, often punishable by death. You perhaps remember that great scene in the King and I where the King of Siam says to the English teacher, Anna: "why are your eyes higher than mine?"

Now, of course, that was abused, and in our liberal democratic societies, we've gotten away from looking at all people who are supposed to be great as great. But, it is still the fact that there are people who are great, and when you are in their presence, you know it. You do not start discussing with them how great you are since you know that you simply are not what they are. No, in the presence of true greatness, one does not exalt one's self. That is to challenge the truly great one. No matter how great your deeds, there is a proper attitude and even posture of the body that reflects a true response to greatness.

We've recently been reminded of how small many of us are, how petty many of our concerns are, not be encountering someone who is great, but by witnessing an event of almost unimagined magnitude. In the shadow of the events of the 11th of September, events of a magnitude that rivals much of what many of us at least in this generation have ever seen, so many people have found themselves overwhelmed. Not surprisingly. These are events that dwarf most of the humdrum, mundane events of our lives. They have cast a new light on many of our lives, making us ask ourselves about many of the things that we felt so troubled about. They have brought many us out of our navel-gazing and forced us to look up, both physically and spiritually. They are the most dramatic contemporary events of the kind of greatness that Joel described. Only the most callous, self-centered and presumptuous people would have said on September 11: well, if I had been there, it would all have been different. The natural reaction is how small it makes one feel and, if you ask whether there is anything you can do, it is almost always: how can I do anything to help in a situation of such magnitude?

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a story about two people who enter into the very presence of the Almighty himself. If anyone is great, it is the Almighty God. And, yet, Jesus says, when a Pharisee, a great religious lay-leader of his day, a scholar of Scripture, a person who if anyone knows the right way to be around God it is he, when he comes into the presence of God what does he do? He starts talking about all of the great and wonderful things that he has done, how he is not like other men who live dissolute and unrestrained lives. No, he fasts twice a week and he gives to the Temple one-tenth of all that he earns with his own hands.

Now, rather than commend this man, something that everyone listening to Jesus would have done, Jesus' words concerning the Pharisee, who in the people's eyes, is the perfect religious person, are incredibly humiliating. Jesus is saying: doesn't he know where he is? Doesn't he know in whose presence he really is? If he really knew that he were in God's presence, he could

never say the things that he does. Rather, like Isaiah, he would throw himself face down before the throne and bewail that he has come into such a presence!

And, this, Jesus says, is exactly what the tax-collector, with whom the Pharisee compares himself, does. It is the tax-collector who cannot even lift up his eyes to meet the eye of his Sovereign, who says, "God, spare me a sinner." It is the miserable tax-collector, who has nothing to commend himself, who, in the presence of true greatness realizes just how far he is away from greatness. It is he, Jesus says, that God is pleased with. Why? Because it is the tax collector who appears really to know where he is and in whose presence he is. If there is an Isaiah in this picture, it is the tax-collector and not the Pharisee. And, all of the people who would have heard Jesus in that day, would have made a collective gasp!

Now, this is significant but it is not the end of the story. It might be enough to say that this is all there is to be said. There are religions in the world that end with statements like: God is great, and you are a worm. In these religions, submission and obedience and groveling were ALL that God wants. But, this is not so with faith in Jesus. First, because that leaves us with the suspicion that if we simply humble ourselves and grovel, then we shall be great one day, maybe in paradise, with other martyrs.

Someone might say at this point: oh, I get it. I see: the way to become truly great is simply to say that you're nothing and then God will make you great? That the way to possessions, and kingdoms, and importance is to grovel and then to reap the benefits? If I grovel enough and say what a miserable sinner I am, not only will I feel better about what I've done, but God will also reward me then! I get it.

I have to admit that that is one way to look at the greatness that Jesus offers. But, I think that you would all agree with me that that would simply be to miss the point and end up where the Pharisee is in our story, except now he would be a Christian Pharisee as opposed to a Jewish Pharisee. So, this can't be the end of our story as told by Jesus.

But, second, this is not the end of the story because it also seems to say that no matter what I do, God will never be pleased with anything that I do. And that is clearly wrong. No this story must be placed in the wider context of Jesus' teaching about true greatness in God's sight. This true greatness consists in something so wildly absurd as to be almost unthinkable to a person in Jesus' day. And, yet we take it for granted. True greatness as Luke's Gospel has tried to show starts with coming before this great God, and realizing who he is, and then realizing that the Almighty loves you as a father loves a child.

For Jesus true greatness means recognizing that at any time, wherever you are, in whatever situation you are, you may, as a child of God, come running into the throne room of God and throw yourselves into the arms of your father who always welcomes you with open arms and not be turned away.

True greatness means recognizing that the Almighty could cast all of our works to the ground, and destroy us in an instant, but that He will not because He loves us. Because our God is not a God who will see his child coming with the model ship he or she has just put together and cast it to the floor and say: it's nothing, you miserable little scum bag; only I am great. No, our God is a God who will see his child coming with the model ship he or she has just put together and rejoice with the child and take him or her into His arms and delight with the child in what he has done.

My friends, the problem with the Pharisee was not his works as such, but because he didn't recognize this God, in whose presence he thought he was standing. This God is the God made known to us in Jesus, a God who is royal sovereign of the universe, but also our Father, who delights in us.

So, indeed, bring all of your accomplishments, all of those things that you are proud of, all of your service, your money, your ideas to show your Father, not because you think that you're as good as god, but because you love him like a father. It doesn't matter

- whether you are a child who has wandered, a prodigal child, or the most obedient child the world has seen,
- whether you are a tax collector or a person whose life revolves around church,
- whether you are a person of a disordered life, like the women that Jesus met who had, well, to put it mildly not always lived the best life, or whether you are the most faithful spouse ever

And live your life this week as if at the end of every day you were going to bring something great home to show your father.

The Almighty who is also our Father, to whom we are bold to pray, will welcome you with open arms, because he loves you steadfastly with infinite mercy and grace. So, bring those things that you are proud of to show Him in the same way that you would come running to a proud parent to show him or her a new toy, a new friend, something that you had made at school, knowing that he will not only not push you away, and say, "another time", or worse yet, "you miserable little worm", but He will be thrilled with what you have done under His guidance. I guarantee you: he will be thrilled as he watches you, running towards Him, full tilt as if you were running a race with your heart set on winning. And he will rejoice as much as you will, when you leap into his arms.