

“Being Great” has had quite a run in our culture over the past couple of years. Whatever your political leanings or convictions, we can all agree that the *idea* of being great has had quite a run. Just the idea, the promise, the hope, of “Making America Great Again,” was enough to propel the unlikeliest of candidates all the way to the White House.

But you see, “being great” is one of those slippery ideas, kind of like “being spiritual.” It can mean very different things to very different people, which is part of the genius of making it so central — and yet so vague — as a campaign slogan. Being great can mean almost anything we want; anything that makes us feel good or important; anything flattering or nostalgic. It’s a slippery idea.

Which is maybe why we’re just as comfortable with the same idea in such different contexts. From politics to breakfast cereal. I mean, for the past 55 years Tony the bandana-wearing Tiger has been pointing his finger up in the air and enthusiastically growling that Frosted Flakes are *grrr-eat!* Never mind the only evidence of this greatness seems to be that he’s a tiger & the frosting is sweet. I do love that one commentator suggested a tiger might be purring, not growling, if it’s pleased with something, so maybe a more realistic slogan would be that Frosted Flakes are *prrr-ty good*. Clever.

The point is that whether we’re talking about breakfast cereal or politics, the idea of greatness has always been up for grabs. It’s always been a kind of container for our hopes or dreams; just waiting to be filled by clever marketers or powerful

personalities. And we find the same thing happening in today's readings. In Exodus, when Moses is facing the possibility of a revolt or dying in the desert, he turns to God and says, *Show me your glory! Show me your greatness!* In the Gospel when Jesus is confronted by a couple of groups trying to trap him he says, *Show me the image! Show me this greatness!*

What does greatness mean for Christians in a world where we're just as likely to find it on a cereal box, or on a bright red hat with the most powerful ruler in our world? You see, if we just follow cereal boxes or politicians we're eventually going to end up making our God look either silly, or scary; either absurd or terrifying. One of the invitations for Christians in every generation is to define, again, what we mean by greatness; not as a catchy slogan or clever marketing, but greatness as one of the defining characteristics of our God. What do we mean when we cry out like Moses to God: *Show us your greatness?* Let's look at our readings. And let's begin with one that's probably most familiar: a debate in the gospel about politics & power.

Today's Gospel is all about power, plain & simple. The Pharisees & Herodians were two groups who *hated* each other — it's like the Tea Party and the ACLU working together. Amazingly, they both decide that whatever their differences, they can at least agree on getting rid of Jesus. Because he's trouble. No one can pin him down, the crowds keep following him, and he's splitting both of their support bases. So they team up to trap him. On the surface, it's about taxes.

But underneath, it's about whose greatness really matters: God's or Caesar's. It's a thinly veiled way to pit the power of empire (Herodians) against the people of the land (Pharisees). They're trying to discredit Jesus with one group or the other — they don't care which one. They begin with false flattery, "Teacher we know you're a straight shooter. You don't mess around or play favorites." Laying it on thick, slowly turning up the heat, lulling Jesus (they hope) into a sense of complacency until it's too late & the conflict boils over. It's kind of like that cruel experiment with a frog in a pot of water who can't tell what's happening as the water gets hotter & hotter until it's too late. I know it's cruel and we'd never boil frogs here in Boston. We save that kind of treatment for lobster....

When hostile forces and competing interests push Jesus to the brink; when they tighten the screws & turn up the heat. When they force him into a showdown about raw power — Jesus responds like any of Israel's faithful prophets. He says, *Show me the glory* of which you speak. Show me this greatness.

Because here's the point. If Caesar's greatness can be reduced to a tiny image on a coin then go ahead and pay him back in that same image. Pay him in his own coin. But don't forget, Jesus says, God deserves payment in his own image too. Or as we hear, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

It's a great line. The crowds are amazed. Jesus' enemies go away fuming (for now). But it still leaves a gaping question for you & me. And here it is: what does

it mean to “give God the things that are God’s”? How do we pay back God in the same coin if God’s image isn’t something we can package or represent on shiny metal? For that answer, we need our first reading from Exodus.

Because in Exodus God’s greatness is on full display, with plagues & miracles, firestorms & death. We even get the parting of the Red Sea. But today, by the time these people have passed through the waters of slavery and they’ve been birthed into a new life of freedom; by this point in the story we begin to realize that God’s greatness also includes deep mystery.

In Exodus, the greatness of God is *both* powerful to deliver but *also* difficult to grasp. It isn’t something to display like a golden calf (which didn’t stop them from trying...). In the words of our Psalm, God’s greatness is both weighty enough to shake the earth and intimate enough to hear our cries. What we see in Exodus today is an image of almost tragic longing when God tells Moses that he can’t even fathom — let alone survive — a direct encounter with divine greatness. But, we hear, Moses can see the backside of God’s glory as God’s goodness passes by.

Whatever “God’s backside” means, think about the image for a moment. It’s stunning. Whatever we consider to be *most* impressive about God is described as *merely* the backside of God’s goodness because apparently that’s all we can handle. God says, “Moses, you can’t see my face. But you can know my goodness.” Not my image, God says, but here’s the key: you can know my character. God’s greatness *is* God’s character of grace, mercy & love. “I will be gracious to

whom[ever] I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom[ever] I will show mercy.” Stunning.

Compare that definition of greatness with some of our popular definitions. Just last week a political advisor on Capital Hill said this. He said, “*Presidential campaigns are won with big, simple, directional promises that rarely align well with the complexity [of] the Oval Office.... So presidents do the best they can to stretch the fabric of incomplete outcomes to cover as much bare backside as possible.*”¹ That’s not just this administration. It’s every admin. In our world, greatness instinctively means covering our backside. Greatness means covering our weakness, failures, or maybe our exaggerated claims. To borrow another advertising slogan, greatness in our world means: *never let ‘em see you sweat.*

But for God’s people that not what greatness means. It never means covering our backside as if we’re the source of greatness. It means glimpsing God’s character. Greatness for God’s people means first glimpsing, and then sharing, God’s mercy & love for anyone — whether they deserve it, or not, whether they’ve earned it, or not, whether they even appreciate it, or not. No wonder God’s greatness has always been mysterious. Because if God’s greatness is really about mercy, goodness & love, then it can’t be minted or even seen directly. It can only ever be glimpsed or known in living relationships between you and me.

In Scripture we are the image of God created to share the greatness of God’s

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/14/us/politics/promise-the-moon-easy-for-trump-but-now-comes-the-reckoning>

mercy & love with creation. The mission of God's people is about participating in God's character of mercy & love. God's character in us *is* the divine image. God's character in us *is* God's power at work. And the only thing we ever have to pay back is God's own grace, goodness, mercy, and love.

So the deepest question of our lives is never whether God's greatness, mercy & love happen to shine down upon us with some kind of special favor. The question is whether *we* have glimpsed God's greatness, mercy & love in Jesus; whether we, like the Thessalonians in today's Epistle, "have turned to... a living and true God" instead of any imposters, perpetually covering the backside of their own weakness. The deepest question is whether we, like apostles, martyrs, and saints of old, are learning to become imitators of Jesus so we can share the greatness of divine mercy & love.

When that happens, St. Paul says the Gospel comes alive, "not in word only, but also in power," (1.Thess. 1.5). God's greatness, comes alive in our world as we become imitators & instruments of divine mercy & love. As we learn to imitate Jesus through our gathered worship & prayer. As we learn to imitate Jesus in acts of mercy & grace — then, and only then, the world begins to glimpse God's greatness in the Church. Then, and only then, we begin to grasp the deep mystery shared by one of the Church's earliest theologians, that the glory of God is a human being — you & me — but a human being fully alive.² *Amen.*

² Irenaeus