

Humility Part One: The Real Smallness Of Your Greatness

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Red Klotz died this past year. He was 93. Red Klotz may not be a name you've ever heard and he was glad for that to be the case. Red Klotz was the founder and player and manager and coach of a basketball team called the Washington Generals. The Washington Generals are the team that Red Klotz organized to be the perennial opposition to the world famous Harlem Globetrotters –the comedic basketball phenoms. Every time the Harlem Globetrotters play, and they are still playing, they play the Washington Generals. And every time the Globetrotters beat the Generals. Now the Washington Generals have always been a very good team. It is team always filled with former college players and NBA players – Red Klotz played on the championship Baltimore Bullets back in the 40's. But the whole purpose of Red Klotz and the Washington Generals was to make the Harlem Globetrotters look good. Meadowlark Lemon, Curly Neal, Goose Tatum and even Wilt Chamberlain for a time and all the rest would perform their antics on the court and the Generals were the straight guys – the guys that helped make the Globetrotters funny. For the Globetrotters to look so good, the Generals had to look a little foolish. Said Klotz: "Laurel had Hardy, Lewis had Martin, Costello had Abbott, and the Trotters have us." The purpose of it all was for the Generals always to come in second to the Globetrotter's first. Except one night back in 1971 when Red Klotz by accident made a shot he wasn't supposed to make and the Generals won. Never has a man felt so

bad about winning. The Globetrotters didn't mind. Years later the incomparable Meadowlark Lemon said this about Red Klotz: "... if anybody calls Red a loser, they're missing the whole point. When a Globetrotter game is over, folks never remember the final score. People remember the laughter." Red Klotz may have lost almost every game but he wasn't a loser because he was part of something bigger.

Maybe with his leather girdle, camel's hair and locust diet – John the Baptist was setting himself up to be called a loser. Out there in the Judean desert – the voice crying in the wilderness – inviting whoever would listen to receive the baptism of repentance – calling the religious leaders snakes. Talk about marginalizing yourself. Talk about the highway to oblivion. Talk about never getting on the cover of People magazine – John the Baptist in the eyes of many was walking around with a big L on his forehead. It's interesting that the good news begins with a loser.

It didn't seem to matter – it appears. He was who he was. Someone was coming greater than he, and folks better get ready. Messiah was coming and folks better get ready.

Interesting isn't it – that of all the advent figures with the exception of Jesus himself – John the Baptist is the only one who appears in all four of the Gospels. Doesn't get on our Christmas cards or Christmas mangers, but he gets into every Advent story. Not that he would have wanted it that way – the whole point was to point to someone else – but there is something about John the Baptist the pointer –that tells us something about the kingdom Jesus said was at hand. It's how the gospel starts and its how the gospel continues – with those who see themselves as a part of some greater story. The gospel starts and the gospel continues when people as unique and as special as they are – see themselves as a part of God's greater unfolding purpose.

It's that way from the very beginning in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew starts his Gospel by reminding us of the great big story – four paragraphs he takes to tell us in chapter one of the all the generations that preceded Jesus. The fourteen generations from Adam to David. The fourteen

generations from David to the exile. The fourteen generations from the exile to Joseph the father of Jesus. Generations and generations of surprising people who were characters in the great story of God's redemption. And then comes Joseph – who with pregnant fiancée is happy to bow out of the story – save his own reputation and pride – but the angel says, Oh no Joseph – your life is a part of something greater. Take Mary as your wife. And the good news for Joseph begins when he sees it – when he sees his life as a part of something greater. And he submits to the angel's will. The wise men follow the star and make their way to Bethlehem – and Matthew tells us that when they entered the house they knelt down and worshipped – they saw their lives, their gifts, as a part of something greater. Even King Herod – nasty King Herod –, though he didn't want to have any part of the story – finds himself having to submit to the schemes of the angels and can't keep the story from unfolding beneath his very eyes. And then there is John who when Jesus comes to be baptized – with every fabric of his being says, "Oh no ... this isn't a part of the story. This isn't what the kingdom is about – if there is anyone who will stoop it will be me. And Jesus says, That's the point – the kingdom starts for us all when we stoop. The kingdom starts for me when I stoop. For this is what the kingdom of God is – it is a kingdom of stooping. The new kingdom starts when the new king bows down. This is how gospel starts and this is how gospel continues.

So different from what we might expect, right? 2015 will be the year of political announcements. Throughout this upcoming year we will hear from week to week, month to month, about yet another candidate who has decided to run for President. And those announcements will take place in big places with big crowds with big balloons and big music and big fanfare and those candidates will mount their podiums and tell us how lucky America is that he or she has decided to seek the throne. There will be no stooping. There will be no kneeling. There will be no humbling. That's not what that kingdom is all about.

But the kingdom of God gets its beginning when John the straight man – John the loser – John the Baptizer – says, "I am not worthy to stoop and untie your sandals." And Jesus says, "You get it.

But now's your turn to stand and for the sake of righteousness, it's my turn to stoop. This is the way the kingdom of heaven begins.

You see the kingdom of heaven begins in you and in me – not with some sense of false humility. Some needless cowering before a power hungry king. Again, that's Herod's deal. The kingdom of heaven begins when we humbly claim our identity as children of God. Not co-pilots with God, not representatives of God, not buddies with God, but children of God - toddlers of God. It's not until we see ourselves as children of God – that we can see the wonder and majesty of the Father.

Philips Brooks, the great Boston preacher and composer of "O Little Town of Bethlehem", wrote once: "The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is."

The real smallness of your greatness. You see, it's only when John can see Jesus for who he is that he can see himself for who he really is – and that he can later say about Jesus, "He must increase and I must decrease."

The first step in the good news for you and me is to get a right view of ourselves. The smallness of our greatness.

I love the story that Ralph Kiner – the great left fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates decades ago – when he went to the front office to meet with Branch Rickey, the owner of the Pirates, to demand a raise. "I hit 37 homeruns this year. I led the league in homeruns. I want a raise!" Rickey replied, "Ralph, where'd we finish this year?" "Last," said Kiner. "Well, we can finish last with you and we can finish last without you."

The smallness of our greatness. The good news starts when we gain a right view of ourselves.

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison as a prisoner of the apartheid regime in South Africa – most of that time was in an 8 foot by 7 foot cell with a straw mat to sleep on. He was allowed one letter and one visit every six months. In a matter of days he went from that to becoming first the vaulted leader of the anti-apartheid movement and then to becoming a candidate for President and then becoming the first democratically elected leader of the country and then to being a Nobel Prize winner and world leader. At the top of his world popularity an incident occurred in a visit he made to Shanghai. Staying at a hotel there, Mandela was told that the hospitality staff in that culture would consider it an affront if the former President would not allow them to make his bed. Mandela as a matter of discipline and as a matter of perspective and as a matter of reminding himself who he was would never allow anyone to make his bed. He made it himself. What to do? Mandela asked if the staff of the hotel would be gracious enough to give them a moment of their time, especially the maids who were to make his bed. They did. He extended them his appreciation for their service. And would they be kind enough to extend to him a further service by allowing him to make his own bed? They agreed.

The good news begins when you have a right view of yourself. The smallness of your greatness.

Maybe Jesus had it in the back of his mind when he sat at table for the last time with his band of disciples. Realizing that their little world was going to fall apart soon with betrayals and denials and doubts and fleeing, maybe Jesus remembered back to the beginning when John could see the kingdom coming. The kingdom of stooping. The kingdom of seeing that you are a part of something greater. And because none of those men around that table were worthy to even to stoop and untie his sandals – Jesus knew what he had to do – stoop and untie theirs. Towel, basin in hand, he washed their feet. A new baptism shall we call it? Oh no, says Peter like the loser John – oh no, not me! And Jesus says – oh yes, you. You take part in me only when you let me stoop below you.

Good news begins when you have a clear and right view of yourself. What was it Meadowlark Lemon said about Red Klotz? "... if anybody calls Red a loser, they're missing the whole point. When a Globetrotter game is over, folks never remember the final score. People remember the laughter."

Who had the laugh when in 1881 not long after Booker T. Washington came to be the new President of Tuskegee University he was walking through the nicer part of town and a woman on her porch thinking he was the hired help, called out to the professor -- "Would he please come and chop wood for her stove." Without missing a beat the professor walked over to the wood pile, took off his coat, and started chopping. When a good pile had been assembled he took it into the house and then went on his way. Later the woman's daughter asked her mother if she knew what she had just done -- that she had asked the President of the local college to chop her some wood. The woman was mortified and the next morning appeared in Washington's office. Apologizing profusely, she said repeatedly, "I did not know it was you I put to work." Washington replied, "It's entirely all right madam. I like to work and I am delighted to do favors for my friends and neighbors."

Who had the laugh? It's not the final score that matters -- it's the laughter they remember. The smallness of our greatness.