

True Greatness

Dr. Lal Hmingliani Browne



Luke 7:18-28

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, be to God.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight o Lord our God and our redeemer. Amen.



Our scripture today contains a paradoxical verse. Jesus said, “I tell you among those born of women no one is greater than John, yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John...”

My Father

My father gave me my definition of true greatness. He:

- served in the military;
- was the husband of a beautiful ‘village princess’;
- was father of 6 (I am the oldest);
- loved cooking and eating and helping others regardless of religion, race or economic background;
- was a founder of a Presbyterian church and loved God;
- was a lay preacher – lover of the Psalms;
- was generous, loyal, content, grateful, humble, wise;
- was a heavy smoker – died of lung cancer age 51.

I would like share the stories of a few people I personally know who live truly great lives:

Mother Theresa

Mother Theresa, my life long hero was great because she cared for the poorest, the sickest, the most unwanted and abundant

children and adults. She saw the face of Jesus in everyone she helped. The whole of India called her Mother. She was named a saint by the Vatican last year, but she was a saint to me years before.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi was famous for leading India to independence – okay so I never met Gandhi myself – I just feel like I have. Anyway, I wish I had. To me he was great because he used only non-violent methods to lead his country to independence.

Pi Beli (the Praying Lady)

Pi Beli was one of my mother’s closest friends who watched me grow up (pictured on the front cover). She was not much of a talker or teacher. Her ministry was to stay in her home, listen for the needs of others and pray. She prayed for hours every day.

Whenever I visited, she would greet me and we would have tea. Then, she would listen attentively to me. When I asked, she would pray aloud for me. Every time I felt her I felt closer to God than when I arrived.

Once I left for college she started praying for

me every single day. She has prayed daily for every congregation I served - including COP. And, when I got married, she started praying for my husband every day. He really needs it! Poor guy, he is married to me!

Letty Russell

Letty Russell was an ordained Presbyterian clergy woman, a leading theologian and professor at Yale Divinity School. Her passion was to teach women of patriarchal cultures that God’s love and grace was the same for all human beings. She loved to teach that God loves women and girls exactly the same as God loves men and boys. She helped women from all around the world find our voices. She was so patient she even managed to educate me when I was a lot younger and more stubborn than I am now Imagine that...

Owen Glen Morris

Owen Glen Morris was one of the most senior and distinguished engineers in NASA. He led the team that designed the Apollo Lunar Lander and later figured out how to fly a space shuttle on the back of a Boeing 747. It was on Glen’s word that the Lunar Lander was used as a “life raft” during the Apollo 13 crisis. It kept

“...true greatness does not lie in the fame we receive, but in the service we give as we love God and love neighbor.”

the astronauts safe until they could be brought home. But what makes Glen great to me was his passion for others in mission and sharing the gospel with everyone.

Rick Arnold

Ricky is an astronaut who made a voyage on the space station. To me, he is great because he taught children at an elementary school in Arian Jaya, a remote island in Indonesia. And because he became a Shepherding Deacon!

Lee Greene

Of COP is truly great to me. Lee is famous for being a leader on a team of medical chemists who won the Nobel Prize. He is great to me because his chosen service in COP has been as a Memorial Service Coordinator; a tutor in our tutoring program; and as a Shepherding Deacon! Do you notice a theme here? He is great to me because he is grateful for his life and for grace in his life. In his case, the grace in his life is his wife Grace.

As my father taught me, true greatness for me does not have to do with status and power. It has to do with character, value, faith and service. Our scripture passage today helps us understand how Jesus saw greatness. In this passage, John the Baptist is presented as a humble prophet who cares that everyone hears about God's grace.

When Jesus talks about John, he says John is the messenger who presents the Messiah to the world. He is the "greatest of those born of women." John was content to have a secondary role. He did not see himself as the 'greatest'. John only wanted to point everyone towards the One Who is to Come - that is, Jesus.

Jesus says that John's role and useful greatness belonged to the past. He challenges us to a new greatness that is greater than that of John. John asked Jesus, "Are you the One who is to come?" In answering, Jesus defines true greatness. Jesus' greatness was not in the title, "the One Who is to Come." His greatness was in how he helped those in need.

Jesus says, 7:22 "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.."

Jesus says in Matthew 20:26 says "...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant."

It is repeated again in the gospel according to Luke 10:27 when Jesus says what we must do to inherit eternal life "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus is saying that true greatness does not lie in the fame we receive, but in the service we give as we love God and love neighbor. Our neighbors include those most in need of help. No condition is placed on who is our neighbor.

It makes no difference to Jesus as to a neighbor's:

- country of origin;
- race;
- wealth;
- health;
- religion

John and Jesus lived and ministered in a particular time and place. We live in a very

different time. Yet the need for Jesus' kind of true greatness has not changed. As an immigrant citizen, the language I now hear in this nation is scary to me.

I love this country. I chose to become a citizen. I want this country to be great the way Jesus defines greatness – where people out of their love for God - love those most in need of love. I love this church and give thanks to God for calling me to work alongside you in offering Christian care. Together we love and help for those in need locally and globally.

I invite all of us to continue to give generously for the glory of God. When we focus our love on helping those most in need we will find – paradoxically - that it is our love for the least that makes this church big. It makes it bigger than you, bigger than me, bigger than the collective sum of all of us. It makes the church the Body of Christ in the world. Truly Great! Thanks, be to God. Amen.



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February 12, 2017


Church of the Palms

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