

The Great Me
Pentecost 21, Year B
Ps 104; Job 38:1-7, Heb 5:1-10; Mk 10:35-45
Rev. Stephanie Bekhor
October 18th, 2015

Before we begin I want to again thank Ellen Miller for preaching last Sunday; Ellen—and all who have preached from this pulpit—thank you for sharing your gifts with us and inviting the Holy Spirit to speak through you. Your preaching gives us different perspectives on the scriptures and different ways for God to speak to us. I have been enriched by your sermons. Bless you.

Let us join together in prayer: Father God, come to us; speak to our hearts and minds; for we ask in the name of your Son and by the power of your Spirit.

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Last weekend my family was able to go on retreat to Capon Springs, WV, a magical 130-acre sanctuary of trees, cliffs, mountains and natural springs that in addition to stunning views and peaceful paths offers lodging ,cozy nooks, places for kids to play and three home-cooked meals a day [SLIDE #7].

I share this to peak your interest—no mountain pun intended; I would love for us all to go. Perhaps a church-wide retreat?

The property was purchased in 1932 by Lou and Virginia Austin and advertised as a get-away and a haven; over 80 years later the Austin's, through their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, continue to serve others by offering Capon not only as a respite but as a sacred space full of love, connection and trust [SLIDE #10]. I can think of no other place like it on earth.

In 1957 Lou Austin penned a children's book that can be found, along with the Bible, on every dresser in every room at Capon Springs: *The Little Me and the Great Me*. The basic message, which pulses through Capon, is simple: “blow out the little me, and breathe in the great me.”

The little me, illustrated here on Liam's t-shirt, is throwing a fit. On the back of the t-shirt is the great me, smiling ear-to-ear. The book's message, in a nut shell, is this: be the greatest self you can be. It sounds a bit like the army slogan: “be all that you can be,” though Lou Austin would've been more specific; be all the great you can be but not all the not-so-great.

Austin's message is good but it needs seems teasing-out. As one person implied in his review of the book on Amazon: “I grew up with this book, and it took years to get the...concept of dualism
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and the eternal struggle between [the] ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parts of myself out of my psyche. [It’s] important to understand all parts of yourself; not...to accept every action, but certainly to own them. It’s [too] easy...to identify with the little me and feel the great me is beyond reach. Much better healing comes from seeing [the self] as a whole person” (Landreau, A. www.amazon.com 22 September 2014).

The reviewer makes a good point; other messages than “good-bad” need to be in place: self-love and self-governance, as well as parental nurture, kindness and boundaries, especially when kids are struggling, crying and being the so-called “little me.” It’s dangerous to equate the great-me with smiling and happy and the little-me with crying and upset.

What then does it mean to be great? That depends largely on one’s values, but for a follower of Christ it is the opposite of what our rise-to-the-top culture cherishes, or of the tantrum the little-me throws if she doesn’t get what she wants. Jesus tells his disciples, as recorded in today’s gospel:

“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them...But it is not so among you; *whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant*, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a servant of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

I’ll paraphrase using Lou Austin’s language: to be the great-me is be a servant and to have a servant’s heart.

It also means, according to today’s psalm, to regard *God* as “great...clothed with honor and majesty, wrapped in light” (Ps 104:1-2a); and, to regard *God’s creative acts* as great; the psalmist poetically, beautifully continues: “You stretch out the heavens like a tent, you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind; you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers” (Ps 104:3-4).

Job understands *God* as no less great, though he’s understandably angry at *God* due to his tremendous losses and suffering; he imagines *God* bellowing to him “out of the whirlwind:

‘Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?...where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?’” (Job 38:1-7).

God is not exactly the picture of compassionate here, but *God* makes a good point: *God* is great, and our understanding is so darned limited!

Our epistle lesson proclaims a third greatness; not only God and God's creative acts, not only servanthood, but submission, exemplified by Jesus who "did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son' (Hebrew 5:2-5).

The author of Hebrews continues: "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to [God the Father]"—these loud cries and tears are not to be confused with those of the little-me throwing a tantrum; these are the wails of distress of one who is about to face an agonizing death.

The one to whom Jesus cried, God the Father, "was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

He doesn't want to be heard, he wants to be saved!

"Although he was a Son," Hebrews continues, "he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." (Hebrews 5:7-9)

Well that doesn't sound so great. Are we to believe that Jesus was a good son because he obeyed a father who would send him to his death?

It would be easy to simplify today's scripture lessons, to see them dualistically: great/small, good/bad, submit/rebel. It would be so easy to use these passages, as sadly is done, to limit and abuse rather than to expand and uplift.

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That God is great is not a stretch for us; God's greatness is visible through the universe: from a single cell to a complex organism, in a delicate flower, a lightning storm, a gentle rain, a fierce wind, a glorious mountain view onto a valley below: "O Lord, O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth...! The God who "laid the foundation of the earth" I honor and praise and marvel.

That greatness is service to others is not a stretch for us either; the God who calls us to care for all of creation we honor and praise because, Lord knows, we need more servants in this world: those more interested in being great not by what they can get but by what they can give.

Consider the example of the father who scribbled this prayer on a piece of paper and put it in the coat pocket of his son, who was found at the end of WWII in Ravensbruck, one of the Nazi concentration camps:

O Lord, remember not only the men and woman of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us: Instead remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering, our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble. When our persecutors come to be judged by you, let all of these fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness. (Yao, Victor. "One of the Most Powerful Prayers." *Sermon Central*. January 2001.)

What a servant of God; Jesus might well have said the same thing. In fact, he did: "Father, forgive them, For they know not what they do."

That greatness is synonymous with God; that greatness is connected to service, we get. That greatness is submission, however, is another story, at least for me. Are we to understand that Jesus is great, for example, because he "reverently submitted" to God in his moments of greatest distress; because he was not only obedient to but made perfect through suffering?

That seems a dangerous proposition; in fact, with the exception of the psalter, the divine images today's scriptures give us are rather challenging:

In Job: a God who has caused his faithful servant to suffer just to prove to Satan that Job will *remain* faithful, and then who bullies Job for daring to complain;

In Mark: a God who sends his Son into the world knowing he will undergo great suffering; and,

In Hebrews, a God who "was able to save [Jesus] from death" but who didn't despite his Son's "prayers and supplications, loud cries and tears" (Hebrew 5:7).

Honestly, friends, I don't know what to tell you other than I am uncomfortable with these representations of God. I can't say I share the authors' theologies. That said, I recently came across a story that has helped me better understand:

In 1962 missionaries Don and Carol Richardson went to New Guinea to bring the Good News of Christ to the Sawi people, a headhunting, cannibalistic tribe. The Richardson's began their work among the Sawi by reading through the Gospel of Matthew. But to his consternation when they got to the part of Judas betraying Christ, everyone cheered. They did not realize that their culture was one built around treachery.

The most devious member of the tribe was also the one for whom others had the most respect. The missionary searched for every possible means to explain the greatness of God's

gift of truth and pure love to a people whose values were based on deceit. Then one day, he witnessed a solemn ceremony between two warring tribes. One of the chiefs walked over to the other and handed him a child. In fact, it was the chief's own son. Their custom had been that peace could come between two tribes only if the chief of one of the tribes would give his son over to the people of the other tribe. He was called the "peace child." The chief would place his own son in the hands of a people who hated him and had been his enemies. It was the only way to bring peace between them. Richardson saw in this act the perfect bridge to help these people understand what God had done (Sermon Central Staff. "Peace Child." *Sermon Central*. October 2008).

The God who would send his Son into the world to be a messenger of peace and love to a people who would crucify him—I don't know how wise a choice this was; but, I honor and praise the one who took the risk, who unselfishly gave himself up to save others.

[Share story of young man who saved 12 people from the World Trade Center rather than save himself]

The God I honor and praise is a great God who saves us by whatever means possible; who desires nothing but what's best for creation and who will go to any lengths to reach us. To this God, through Jesus, I submit, for I trust Jesus; he is our high priest, the one to whom we come and lay every piece of ourselves: the great-me, the little-me, the in-between-me.

And beautifully, all that we offer him is sifted through his love and grace by which he refines our "lumps."

We're still lumpy, amen? But Jesus is refining the lumps, helping us to be great-me's, not by how great we are, or might be, but by how great he is.

As the Amazon book reviewer said, "It's too easy to identify with the little me and feel the great me is beyond reach." Jesus is the great-me, and he's right here.

To be great, then, I dare say, is to submit to *God's greatness*: to God's creative power, to Jesus' redeeming grace, and to the Holy Spirit's perfecting love.

Amen.