

“One Little Thing Can Change Everything!”

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Genesis 28:10-19a; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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How do you measure greatness? Many leaders throughout history have tried to preserve their greatness with their buildings, monuments, and tombs. Take Emperor Xin (Chin) of ancient China. His tomb has been the stuff of legend, and descriptions of it were thought to be exaggerations of the real thing. That is, until a farmer happened to unearth one of hundreds of terra cotta soldiers guarding the tomb. You have seen the magnificent photos of the rows and rows of soldiers and horses standing guard over the tomb. Greatness. Obviously this emperor had a lot of power and wealth, and centuries past his life, we are in awe of this long ago ruler.

Alexander the Great wanted to measure greatness by conquering the entire world, so he set out on an amazing attempt to do just that. Of course, he was stopped in that mountainous area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, known by some as Waziristan, an area peopled by tribes and clans of persons who have great pride in their ability to throw off any outside presence, especially a Western power, that may try to bring armies across their boundaries. They still boast today of how they have resisted Alexander the Great, the Romans, the Crusaders, and in our time they have resisted the Soviet Union (a.k.a. Russia) and now our forces. In spite of this resistance, Alexander did conquer much of his known world in his short lifetime, enough to earn the phrase “the Great” as an addition to his name, even into modern times.

I actually got to see the Great Pyramid two years ago, in a whirlwind day trip into Cairo when we had ventured into the Sinai Desert to stay at St. Catherine’s Monastery at the foot of the traditional Mount Sinai. Actually, my impression is that any trip into the city of Cairo will feel like a whirlwind trip! The driving is, well, like nothing I’ve ever seen in any other city. Anyway, the Pyramids of Giza were on our list of things to see in our long day trip. They are indeed amazing, and the largest one deserves its title of “Great.” Surely an amazing Pharaoh built it, one named Khufu (or Cheops, if you want to be a bit more Greek about it).

We visited the museum in Cairo that holds the greatest treasures of Egypt, including the mounds of gold artifacts from the tomb of King Tut, the mummies of the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, and endless arrays of magnificent stone statues. There is way too much to see in that museum on a one day whirlwind tour, so we had a guide show us the highlights of the treasures of the museum. Imagine our surprise when he said he would show us the most valuable artifact in the museum, and he led us to a modest little glass case in a quiet corner of the museum. Was he trying to joke with us? We’d already discovered that he had a good sense of humor. But no, he was very serious this time. He pointed to a small seated figurine, about three inches in height, and he said, “This is the most valuable artifact we have.” Then he explained that it was the only

portrayal of Pharaoh Khufu, the one who had the Great Pyramid built. There are no other known carvings of Khufu, no murals, no pictures, no statues. There is nothing to show us what this greatest builder of Egypt looked like. Except this tiny figurine, and the face of this seated pharaoh resembles the face of the Sphinx of Giza, so some have wondered if the Sphinx is a giant statue of Pharaoh Khufu, though nothing in writing or otherwise identifies this large carving. Something so small amid all the wonders of centuries of wealth and prestige has been able to reveal more than so many other artifacts.

God does not measure greatness the way we do. God does not look at greatness in terms of numbers, or volume, or military strength, or political sway. This is very different from the way humanity has measured greatness throughout history. Kingdoms and their formative leaders like to leave lasting evidence of their greatness for all to see. Human politicians constantly try to impress the masses with their greatness in all kinds of ways, and in this year of a presidential election, we're in for all kinds of shows of greatness and ability from all kinds of candidates.

So when Jesus tries to describe how God's realm is different from any earthly political realm, he has to help our human minds grasp what true greatness really is. Greatness is not all wrapped up in a throne room or a hall of congress. Greatness, in God's terms, is not always obvious. It is small, but active nonetheless. It may be hard to see, yet it has the power to turn things upside down and inside out. It is like a tiny seed that can bring on the invasion of an entire field. It is like a small smattering of yeast that can turn 50 pounds of flour into something huge. It is like hidden treasure or unattainable worth, something unseen that can cause a person to invest all that they have and are in pursuing it. It is like a net, something hard to see, yet something that can draw all the fish in a sea to the surface. It is something that cannot be described by just one parable, and it is something that human minds do not easily grasp.

Human minds get so distracted by the trappings of greatness. We are easily impressed by the Great Pyramid builders and the leaders that have changed the course of history. This business of inner greatness and of subtlety takes a little thinking, and that's not always our style.

Rick Barger, writing for the Alban Institute, reflects on this. He tells a story of two video tapes that were promotional tools given to him. Here is what he writes:

On the front door of our house hung a little white plastic bag with a videotape in it. On its cover was a picture of an immensely obese sumo wrestler. He hung suspended in the air. His legs were split, almost parallel to the ground as if he were a gymnast. His right arm was stretched straight up over his head. The hand in this outstretched arm palmed a basketball. He was a 400-pound Michael Jordan! Under this picture were these bold words: "Just imagine!" In smaller print were these words: "7 minutes."

So what the heck? Not knowing who hung this curious tape on my door or what it was about, I turned on our television, cued up the VCR, and inserted the tape. Almost immediately the room was filled with upbeat music. On the screen appeared a video shot zooming in on the new church facilities of a non-denominational megachurch located on the perimeter of our neighborhood. The audio portion began with the words, "Just imagine." What unfolded over the seven minutes was very clever and inviting. Filled with scenes of smiling and happy people the tape asked me, the viewer, to just imagine a gorgeous place with all kinds of wonderful programs. There were programs for small kids, junior high kids, and high school kids. There were programs for married couples and programs for singles. There were programs for small groups. And there were worship programs. Each of these programs promised excitement, meaning, and fun. I the viewer, was then invited to come to the grand opening of this place.

What unfolded on this seven-minute tape was not unlike another videotape that I had received some time ago. This other tape was from Sandals, a small chain of couples-only resorts located in various places in the Caribbean. My wife and I had celebrated thirty years of marriage by spending a week at a Sandals resort in Jamaica, and they were now offering a special deal to generate more repeat customers. This tape also had all kinds of smiling and happy people. It too promised a gorgeous setting with all kinds of exciting and fun-filled programs.

The similarities between these two videotapes and the experiences they are selling ought to cause us to pause and reflect upon how our market-driven culture perceives the nature and purpose of the church of Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified and is now raised. (A New and Right Spirit: Creating an Authentic Church in a Consumer Culture, 2005, by Rick Barger, The Alban Institute, Herndon, Virginia, pp. 2-3.)

So how is the Church called today, in a consumer culture, to exhibit the Kingdom of God on Earth? How are you and I called to create an authentic Church that will persist in transforming the world, and persist in changing its values into the values of God?

Well, here's the deal. We don't have to build a pyramid to make it happen. The Realm of God is not like any other power on earth. It doesn't need to blast itself into our consciousness. It can be that one little thing that changes everything, like yeast in dough, or like one little persistent weedy seed in a field. It begins with an inward change of heart, and then it has a ripple effect throughout the people and places it touches. You can't really see it or measure it, but it is very real and it is very, very potent. It can change the direction of people in ways only imagined.

William Willimon tells a story about a woman in her 80s who likes to bake oatmeal cookies twice a week and take them to a local youth prison camp. Very charming, he thought. Until he talked with the superintendent of that prison camp. He was told, "Those cookies have transformed this whole place. Some of the young men who are

incarcerated here have never in their whole lives received a gift from anybody until they got a bag of those cookies. They stand there at the door, behind the bars, eagerly awaiting those cookies, as if they were a bunch of little boys on Christmas Day, rather than a group of convicted criminals. Those cookies have changed them.” (Pulpit Resource, July 27, 2008, p. 19.)

So God measures greatness in very different ways than human beings do. It can be easy to overlook the greatness of God’s ways, because they are not as attention-grabbing as other supposedly “great” entities in our world. However, nothing can bring about a grass-roots, get to the heart of the matter change as the greatness of God. If only our warring factions in the world would set down their weapons long enough to let rational, justice-seeking dialogue have an effect, and let the guidance of God’s definition of greatness set the agenda for change! What a world that would be! But that’s the point. It would be a world according to God. And guess what? That’s where you and I come in. It is our job to make inroads in our world for the small yet great and dynamic presence of God in our world. So, let’s get busy! Amen.