

# The MARK of true greatness:

## Reflections on 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 10<sup>1</sup>

by RONALD L. FARMER



In Shakespeare's play, *Twelfth Night*, one of his characters received the following advice in a letter: "Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." When we think of those who are born great, we immediately think of those born to wealthy families like the Rothschilds and the Vander-

bilts, or to royalty such as the House of Windsor. Some—like Luciano Pavarotti and Albert Schweitzer—achieve greatness through what they accomplish. And still others have greatness thrust upon them because of how they react in difficult situations. Such was the case with David the youngest son of Jesse, a mere shepherd boy, who responded to God's call during the dark days of the Philistine crisis.

The story of David's rise to greatness begins in 1 Samuel 16, twenty chapters and many stirring adventures before today's Hebrew Bible lesson. Today's lesson is the account of how David came to be king over all Israel. Seven years had passed since the death of King Saul and Crown Prince Jonathan at the hands of the Philistine army. During those years, David had become king over his native tribe of Judah in the South and had successfully defended it from Philistine aggression. Ishbaal,<sup>2</sup> the only surviving son of Saul, had succeeded his father as king over the other tribes in the North, but things had not gone well for him. In fact, the chapter immediately preceding today's lesson records the murder of Ishbaal by several of his disgruntled army officers. In need of a leader, the elders of the northern tribes approached David and anointed him King over all Israel.

In a politically shrewd action, David moved his capital from Hebron, a city belonging to the tribe of Judah, to Jerusalem, a Canaanite town belonging to none of the twelve tribes of Israel. His action, designed to avoid tribal jealousies, was comparable to selecting Washington, D.C. to be the seat of our federal government. David later moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, making the city the center of both political and religious life.

In verse ten, the author interrupts the narrative flow with an important summary statement: "And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him." On this Independence Day Weekend, we would do well to ponder the mark of true greatness.

A wonderful quotation—falsely attributed to the nineteenth-century French statesman and author Alexis de Tocqueville—has entered the American political lexicon, having been quoted by Presidents Eisenhower, Reagan, and Clinton, and a host of other leaders ranging the full scope of the political spectrum: "America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great." Regardless of who actually penned the words, this statement expresses a profound truth. Goodness and greatness go hand-in-hand.

During King David's lengthy reign, Israel achieved a level of greatness it would never again attain. Indeed, later biblical writers looked back on this time as "the golden age." Today's text asserts unequivocally that this rise to greatness was due to David's basic goodness growing out of his deep religious faith. David and his kingdom became great because he believed the proverb: "righteousness exalts a nation" (Prov 14:34). The next five chapters of 2 Samuel glow with the greatness that comes from goodness, from following God's call.

But, I'm sad to say, David later learned what happens when goodness ceases. Beginning in chapter 11, the text candidly reveals the series of tragedies that befell David, his family, and the Kingdom of Israel when goodness was replaced with self-centeredness and greed. In fact, the remainder of 2 Samuel, fourteen sad chapters, unflinchingly recounts the decline of a once-great man and the repercussions of that decline on the people of Israel. David eventually repented of his sin, but the damage had already been done. Selfishness and greed produce shockwaves of suffering and pain that can reverberate for a long, long time.

The biblical perspective is clear: *true greatness is achieved, not in pursuing self-interest, but in working for the common good.* We live in a relational world; everything affects everything else, for good or for ill. Therefore, we cannot think only of ourselves; we must consider the common good. And because of the interconnected nature of reality, it is only by promoting the common good that we insure our own future well-being. Such is the nature of our relational world.

God calls us to be activists, to undertake a lifestyle that is humane and engaged. Nowhere is God's call more pointed than in Jesus' positive statement of the ethic of reciprocity, The Golden Rule. He did not say, "Do not do to others what you would not want done to you," but rather, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." This is a call to ethical activism for the common good.

God calls us to work so that everyone may enjoy the blessings we want for ourselves—blessings many of us take

for granted (or at least used to): nutritious food, affordable housing, quality education, basic health care, meaningful employment, safe neighborhoods, and an unpolluted environment. But read any newspaper, tune in any news broadcast, log on to the internet, and what do you find? Stories about people who are hungry, and contaminated food that makes people sick; people

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losing their homes through foreclosure, and those who have never had homes to lose; the deterioration of a once-great educational system, and children who have never had access to an education; people who lack even the most basic health care, and the rise of new and frightening viruses; people losing their cherished careers, and people who would give anything for even the most menial of jobs; neighborhoods that are deteriorating, becoming increasingly violent; and an environment on the brink, staggering under the weight of manifold crises.

Is it any wonder that pessimists say we have been living on "a moral savings account" accumulated over many years, but that is no longer being replenished with fresh deposits of goodness? They warn that soon the account will be exhausted and tragedy will befall us—or, as the alarmists

say, the calamity has already begun. "There are no more heroes of goodness today," they lament. "Greatness is a thing of the past."

Call me a starry-eyed optimist, if you will, but I refuse to subscribe to this doom-and-gloom scenario, in spite of the chaos we are currently experiencing. I believe that God is working in our midst today, stirring up a spiritual revolution. Change is in the air. I see it, for example, in the lives of many college students these past few years. Service volunteerism is way up, approaching levels not seen since the 1960s—an increase not entirely explained by the current tough job market. In my conversation with students, I find that an increasing number have entered college to prepare themselves to make a difference in the world, not to pad a résumé in order to land a higher paying job. As Bob Dylan would say, "The times, they are a-changin'."

To be sure, these are turbulent times. But many in this sanctuary have lived through days that were even darker: the Great Depression and World War II. And during those dark days God raised up heroes of goodness who worked for the common good.

One such hero was a German named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A brilliant, young theologian, Bonhoeffer was one of the few German Christians who understood, even before Hitler came to power, that Nazism was corrupting and grossly misleading the nation. Unfortunately, most German Christians were caught up in the nationalistic rhetoric and the promise of restored greatness through military

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might. Bonhoeffer's public denouncement of the party and its Führer cost him his academic career at Berlin University in 1933, but he refused to give up the struggle. After living in England for two years, where he tried to explain to English Christians the struggle within the German Church, he returned to Germany to direct an illegal seminary that attracted young ministers from all over the Reich. Of course, the Gestapo closed the seminary once they learned of it.

Because of his strong public opposition to the Nazis, friends in the United States who feared for his life invited Bonhoeffer to lecture at Union Seminary in New York.

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There he would be safe from Nazis retaliation. He came briefly, but when war in Europe seemed imminent, he returned to Germany, stating: "I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people . . . Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this choice in security."<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer believed that discipleship meant working for the common good, regardless of the personal cost—a conviction reflected in the title of his most famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

After war erupted, he became deeply involved in the underground political movement, and in 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo for his resistance activities. In the various concentration camps in which he was confined, Bonhoeffer inspired everyone who came into contact with him by his indomitable courage, his unselfishness, and his goodness. Even the guards became so attached to him that they smuggled his writings out of prison. In 1945, just days before the Flossenbürg concentration camp was liberated

by the Allies, Bonhoeffer was executed by special order of the Führer himself, when it was discovered that he had participated in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler.

Bonhoeffer's writings smuggled out of prison—theological essays, poems, and letters to his fiancée, family, and friends—clearly reveal that the guiding force in his remarkable life was his faith in God. For him, faith was not to result in pious people who shut themselves off from the world, cloistered in sacramental isolation. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer called for what he termed "a worldly Christianity," a Christianity passionately engaged in the struggle for justice, truth, and goodness. He firmly believed that God calls people to engage in redemptive activity in the world, and that this meant Christians must be willing to suffer for the sake of others.

During the Philistine crisis, God raised up a shepherd boy named David. During the Third Reich, God raised up a young theologian named Bonhoeffer, along with numerous others. And today, as we wrestle with our own pressing problems, I am confident that God is raising up people of goodness and vision who will courageously lead our religious communities, our country, and the world to a better future.

## Notes

1. This article is based on a sermon preached at the Manhattan Beach Community Church, Manhattan Beach, CA, on July 5, 2009.
2. In Hebrew, the name means "Man of Baal," but this does not necessarily mean that Saul's family worshiped Baal. "*Baal* meant 'lord' or 'master' and was probably an acceptable way of referring to the God of Israel in Saul's day. In later times the strong association of the word with the Canaanite god Baal caused it to be avoided. Scribes who found baal offensive often replaced it with *bosheth*, 'shame,' so that Saul's heir seems to be called 'Man of Shame' (Ishbosheth . . .)," (P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "Notes on 2 Samuel" in *The Harper Collins Study Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, Fully Revised and Updated, New Revised Standard Version, (San Francisco: Harper, 2006) 437.
3. In a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 1/3 (1946): 3.

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