



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“Giants, Patriots, and The Greatest”

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Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Isaiah 40: 12-31

Hebrews 12:1-2

Who will be the star of tonight’s Super Bowl? Will it be University of Michigan grad Tom Brady, who has been said to be the greatest quarterback of all time (Joe Montana, 2-2-12), or will it be life-long Presbyterian Eli Manning, who will be playing on his brother’s home field? Will the most memorable commercial be that of a major car company or the creation of a quirky start-up?

Super Bowl Sunday is a huge celebration that captures more of our attention than many of our official national holidays. It is a time to gather with friends and gorge for hours on creative, gridiron-inspired hors d’oeuvres and old favorites like pizza, chips, and chili. The Super Bowl is a giant event for red-blooded American patriots, for those who know statistics dating back to the initial tangle between Green Bay and Kansas City as well as for those who think talk of Xs and Os is a prelude to the launch of Cupid’s arrows next week.

Today’s game is our annual American reckoning of who is the greatest. But, for us who gather here at First Pres, Super Bowl Sunday can be even more. It can be a time to remember who really is really the greatest and to evaluate what we allow to set priorities and what (or whom) we hold up to emulate.

When the hype is over and quiet again settles over Lucas Oil Stadium and the city of Indianapolis, when the players have gone home and the commentators have analyzed every pass route and special teams misstep and penalty that was or was not called, when the last of the party left-overs have been consumed or tossed out, when sports fans have moved on to March Madness or spring training, the juxtaposition of The Greatest and a football team – any football team – will demand another look.

In a culture where athletes are paid millions of dollars, do those salaries define who is worthy of adoration? In a country where officially licensed merchandise, billion dollar television broadcasts, and state-sponsored training programs indoctrinate the masses, what is communicated about what is important, about what matters, about who is thought of as great? In our current environment -- with media saturating our lives more than ever, thanks to the hand-held gadgets many of us walk around with -- can even we in the church maintain perspective on who is truly great and on what is genuinely important?

Superlatives abound in our world. Products are touted as new and improved. Colleges compete to be Number 1 in annual listings. Coaches are thanked as if they were messiahs for winning seasons. Academy Awards for best screenplay and best actor and best cinematography will be given later this month. Whether or not we agree with it, Muhammad Ali's self-proclaimed moniker "The Greatest" has become synonymous with his name. When we are taught it is right to give our thanks and praise to athletes and entertainers, do those same words have a hollow ring when spoken in this place? Are they merely repeated here but not weighted with the significance they deserve?

Who are human beings to make claims of greatness, either for themselves or for their actions or their inventions? What trap do we set for ourselves when we place any human being or activity or man-made product on a pedestal?

The humility of the psalmist is instructive. He says to God, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" The psalmist's words are a reminder of our actual status, egos removed and God-given value retained. We are mere specks in eternity, yet simultaneously we are priceless, unique creations of God. We are mere dust; yet we are beloved children and the media of God.

Those to whom the prophet Isaiah speaks, the people of Israel, have grown discouraged. They are living in exile, under the thumb of Babylon, and among people who worship, not God, but stars. The people of Israel, forced to live in a foreign land, have fallen away from regularized worship, yet they blame God for the disconnect they feel.

The prophet writes in poetic language, language that paints pictures with each phrase. "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? Weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?"

The vast creation which surrounds us – the mighty oceans and great lakes, the Rocky Mountains and the Himalayas – are like scenery pieces for a child's model train when considered alongside the grandeur and majesty of God. The scale of God's works is beyond compare with the scale of human endeavors. As a set designer might stretch out a curtain, God stretches out the heavens. Massive nations are like dust in the wind; islands are like tiny particles of sand. The stars worshipped by the Babylonians are not gods; they are part of creation. The stars are created by the one God whom we worship and serve. The stars are not powerful in their own right but they are numbered and named, each accorded its own place because of the care and order of God, the God who alone is worthy of adoration.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to people who dwell in a realm of confusion. His listeners are despondent. They doubt the strength of the God of Israel. They feel that God is absent from them. It is they who have fallen away from God, moved away from faith and regularized worship, yet they assign blame to God for the disconnect they feel.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. We wander from God, drift away from time dedicated to prayer, stray from regular fellowship with other believers, and fail to give of ourselves by engaging in acts of mission and service; then we fault God as if God had drawn away from us. When we do not avail ourselves of opportunities to give and receive the love of God, should we blame the Creator or our community? When we set up false idols – objects made from temporal matter – and devote attention to them rather than to God, do we not set ourselves up for disappointment? Is not God alone great, worthy of unguarded praise?

Lisa was only five years old, but she already was smitten with all things football. Her older sister was a cheerleader at the local high school, and Lisa could sit happily for hours and watch them practice. One night, in the middle of football season, it was Lisa's turn to give the blessing around the family's dinner table. With her head bowed and her hands demurely folded, Lisa's treble voice was loud and clear. "God is great: Yea! God is good: Yea! Let us thank God for this food. Yea God!"

Maybe a little child can lead us. Lisa can remind us, this Super Bowl Sunday, of what we really need to know. Only God is truly great. Only God deserves our highest praise and adoration, not stars of stage or sport. When life becomes difficult and our resources wane, it is we who forget this about God, not God who forgets us.

Friends, do not misunderstand *Giants, Patriots, and The Greatest*. Tonight's game, appropriately, will be a time of frivolity and fun. God approves. While it is right to pray for the health and safety of all the participants rather than for one team or the other to be victorious, we rightly acknowledge that God blesses some people with incredible athleticism and we appreciate their skills and dedication. God is not a party pooper. God finds delight in our lives being filled with good times and shared experiences. Problems arise only when we substitute false gods for the one true God, the actual Greatest, the only One worthy of unquestioned allegiance.

None of us gathered here today may be a Super Bowl quarterback, linebacker, or kicker – or even know one; but all of us are invited to know The Greatest of all times. The Truly Great is God, and God reaches out to us, lifts us up with strength that exceeds all human limits, and enables us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. With God, whatever hurdles may be in our path are surmountable. With God, whatever opposition we may face is already conquered. Our strength comes from the One who, again and again, invites us to be united with our Creator and the Giver of life, the One who nurtures and sustains us, who nourishes us with the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. The food God offers us around his table this morning fills a deeper hunger than any snack or decadent pleasure, and the joy we know in Jesus Christ is greater than that which any form of entertainment or earthly victory can provide.

So together, let us gather at table to celebrate. Let us celebrate The Greatest – and celebrate that by God's grace, we all are on the same team. Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.

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