

## When We Make Others into Giants

Numbers 13:17-33: (To the spies who go look, the other people seem like giants, and they themselves feel like grasshoppers.)

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22 (Does John the Baptist feel unworthy?)

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I've been here six months now, so I am going to be a little daring today, to share an event about which I have pride. I know excessive pride is not a religious plus, but I pray my pride is not excessive.

It was the semi-finals for regional girls' recreational soccer, when our daughter Alexandra was about 11 or 12 years old. That happened to be a very good year for her team. There were three girls who ran fast and passed the ball back and forth to each other as they ran toward the goal, keeping the defense of the other team confused.

Her team arrived for this semi-final game in their aqua shirts eager and positive, full of confidence—for they had won every game that season. The other team arrived, stepped onto the field, and our girls saw them...especially their "sweeper," who is the player in the strongest defensive position. She was the girl between "our" offense and their goal keeper. Alex's team looked at the "other" team and, quite frankly, those girls *looked like giants*. They were giants. Growth spurts came late for our Bohler children. Alex was fast, but not at all big. Most of the girls on her team weren't too big either. The opponent's, especially their sweeper, were giants.

By half-time the score was zero-zero, not a very unusual score for soccer games. But that score was a surprise to both teams. Zero-zero. The aqua team had held their own; they were amazed. The other team was not leading—they, too, were surprised. However, not long into the second half the other team did get a goal. The score remained 0-1 when it was just a few minutes to the end of the game. However, something had changed on the field. That sweeper didn't seem quite so gigantic. Or, maybe "our" girls seemed bigger—to themselves?

Here comes the prideful part. Alex was passed the ball at about the middle of the field, and she got a break-away. She discovered she was all alone on her team—as the other team's defender ran with her. [Walk over to edge] I always stood on the sideline as close as I was allowed to the goal toward which I wanted the ball to go into. Somehow I thought that my weight at that end of the field would help the ball to roll in that direction. Foolishly, all I could yell, as I was literally quaking all over was "Go, go, go..." John, her dad and the assistant coach, was on the other sideline, and he yelled **a fact—a fact he had observed throughout the game**: "You can beat her, you are faster than her." It is doubtful Alexandra heard either of us. But she kept running, dribbling the ball; *the giant was losing ground*. When Alex reached the goalkeeper and was one-on-one with her, she got a shot off and made the goal. The score was 1-1 with a minute left.

In sudden-death overtime the aqua team ended up losing the game with a penalty kick and some confusion about whether or not the ball hit the pole. But, really, by that time, it did not matter. The giant had been conquered. Or, had she? Maybe what happened was that the little *girls in aqua grew in stature. They grew in stature in their own eyes.*

This is the end of “Football” season, Carolyn, why are you talking about soccer? I pumped John for a current football example. It seems that this year only “giant” teams are in the playoffs. What John came up with happened last year, but I imagine it’s still fresh in many of our minds. Recall that little Appalachia State played—and beat—Michigan? I’m sure that by the end of that game, the Appalachian players had grown in stature in their own eyes.

Evidently human beings have been dealing with their feelings in relation to other humans since we’ve been human beings! Our fascinating story in the Hebrew Bible speaks of people who are perceived to be giants by those who feel like grasshoppers, in comparison. It’s an exciting story; it’s even a spy story! Well, at least it’s a story of spies.

We call the ancient Jewish people, “Israelites.” Of course their descendents have migrated all over the world, but there is a special link with the people we now call “Israelis” who live in the current country of Israel. We might think this Biblical story is archaic, but this very moment, in Israel, there is something happening that, sadly, is not so very different. The ancient Israelites had different interpretations about *why* they had lost their promised land and *what* God was guiding them to do. Contemporary Israelites are also determining how to relate to those in neighboring lands and, we hope, seeking to know what God is guiding them to do.

This is the gist of the historical biblical narrative we read. The Israelites send some of their own as spies to a neighboring land. Why? Well, we’re not sure why; there are some disagreement about why. The spies might have been going to check out the people who inhabited the land, to see how the Israelites would measure up if they invaded and tried to conquer the land. However, the spies might have been going to check out the land itself—how good would it be to settle in, to live upon?

The spies came back with good news—and bad. The land was very good. One report tells of the spies cutting down a cluster of grapes so heavy that two men were required to carry the cluster on a pole. Because of that, they even named the valley “Grape-cluster.” The bad news was that the people there were a race of giants. They were the clan of giants that acquired nearly mythological status in stories, and it was from this clan that the giant Goliath came who was bested by the boy David with a sling-shot. In comparison with these big people, the spies felt like grasshoppers and were sure that the giants would see them as grasshoppers, too, tiny.

Except. Except. Joshua and Caleb were two of the spies who returned and spoke up with a *minority report*: “The land that we went through as explorers is an exceedingly good land, period.” Joshua and Caleb were “can do” people. They basically argued, “The land is good—don’t worry about the possible size of the people there.”

How did the rest of the Israelites respond to the report of the spies? The *leaders* and the *people* had two different responses. Moses and Aaron were angry because the *majority of the spies did not seem to trust God*. Only Caleb and Joshua believed in the stature of the Israelites and trusted God. In contrast to the leaders, the *people*, on the other hand, started to stone Joshua and Caleb, to kill them! How dare these two be so

optimistic? The people murmured. They grumbled. They wished they were back in exile in the desert. They did not like all this uncertainty.

*It is sometimes not easy, even confusing—to know what to do* when we might be facing something gigantic. If we have a Giant in our life that we have to face, how can we build ourselves up to be big enough for the task? We sometimes try to deal with such situations by trying to cut down the “Giant.” **But clearly it’s better for all if instead of taking down the “Giant,” we manage somehow to grow bigger inside ourselves.**

This biblical story involves invasions and war. What do you think, theologically? Does God side with certain people, “God’s people”? Or, is God the “God of all.” In those ancient days, the Israelites did not have any consciousness of a “God of all.” They had their God, and their God would be on their side or their God would be upset and punish them if they didn’t obey. The Israelites knew other people believed in other Gods. Today, with Jesus Christ as the turning point, *we* see that God is the God of all. Not that we completely act that way, but we at least tend to believe that the God we believe in wants all of us to recognize the equal inner stature of absolutely everyone. My guess is that God would probably want us all to find a way to share land.<sup>1</sup>

Is there a Giant in your life? Is there something/someone that, when you think of yourself in relation to it, you feel like a grasshopper? Or, some one who, when you are with them, you have to put some effort into reminding yourself that you have ample stature—within?

What works for you to help you face your giant? I’m going to name just a couple ways that we try.

1. We can remind ourselves that we are loved. Loved. We can name all the people who love us, and then, also, do our best to feel bathed in God’s love. We can remind ourselves that we are loved, no matter what.

2. We can remind ourselves that we are truly connected to others. People “stand” with us, support us. We are not alone.

3. [Walk over to the Giant images the children drew] We can use our imagination—in lots of ways. Perhaps we imagine ourselves to be huge. Let’s say we have to learn a computer program that’s become a giant for us. We can imagine ourselves 20 feet tall, and the computer is just the size of a postage stamp! “I can do it,” I imagine myself saying to the tiny little computer program!

4. Some people carry a little reminder—a yellow bracelet, a precious pebble, a cross necklace, a sock monkey—all these are reminders that we’re loved, others stand with us, and *we are big enough!*

Sometimes another person seems like a Giant to us, and we have absolutely no need to compete with that one. Consider John the Baptist. He was apparently very happy, grateful, to point the way to Jesus. It’s in our Bible that John says he’s unworthy to tie the sandal of Jesus, but I get the sense that John does not feel puny at all. *He’s big enough to recognize the giant. That’s big of him. We can acknowledge giants—nearby or in the news—without that affecting our sense of our own stature. Their giant-hood is neutral for us or makes us simply grateful for them.*

I didn’t expect this story to be so relevant to today’s situation in Gaza. Neither did I anticipate that we as a congregation would be facing a “Giant-of-sorts” with our \$14,000 deficit and 3 days to make it! I think that we can collectively imagine ourselves to be big enough to face this “giant.” Instead of making it into a mountain in our minds, we can

stand-really-close-together-with-each-other-and-God and tell ourselves that this is but a speed-bump on our journey as a congregation. Next Sunday, we will be rightfully proud of ourselves.

The ancient Israelites might have chosen an alternative; they could have sent spokespersons over to the land of Giants to ask them whether they could work out a sharing of resources. They did not need to decide that just because they could do it, they should invade. Today we pray that a peaceful solution emerges in Gaza, and everywhere else that people are dying in war.

There may be things that we as individuals probably could do that we discern, at this time, we really want to pass on. However, using this Biblical story as a METAPHOR, we can remind ourselves whenever we're feeling small, like a grasshopper, in relation to something or someone who seems like a Giant, that our image of ourselves can grow really fast—when we get in touch with our giant God-given inner stature.

Of course, if you prefer, you can imagine someone who loves you yelling from the sideline, not yelling something perfunctory like “Go, go, go”; rather, yelling a FACT: “YOU CAN DO IT!”

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<sup>i</sup> This was a huge change of consciousness historically. See John Cobb Jr., *Structures of Christian Existence*.