

The marks of a great nation

Jeremiah 31:7-14

January 4, 2015

Sing with joy for Israel, the greatest of the nations ...

Do you have a problem with that? Do you have a problem with calling Israel the greatest of the nations? Does it seem to you ... presumptuous? Chauvinistic? Prideful? Does this claim by a Hebrew prophet about his own nation make you uncomfortable?

And yet, our politicians do not hesitate to call the United States of America the greatest of nations, the greatest at least in our own time, if not the greatest nation of all time. And most of us would agree, wouldn't we? We are glad to live here, proud to be citizens of this great nation, convinced of the noble circumstances of its birth and the compelling mandate that makes us now both leader and conscience to the rest of the world.

But are we right? Is this nation great? And, if it is, what makes it great? What are the marks of its greatness?

Wealth? Are we the greatest because we are the richest? The United States is #1 in the world in economic output with a GDP (gross domestic product) more than double that of its closest rival, and yet, of thirty-five developed countries, the United States ranks thirty-fourth in level of child poverty. Is that something to be proud of? Does that make us great?

Is it health? It is true that we spend more than any other nation on health care, and yet, of eleven leading nations -- Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States -- we rank last in access, efficiency, and equity in our health care system, and last in health care outcomes, in being healthy.

Is it education? By most standards of academic achievement, the United States ranks somewhere in the middle of the pack.

If not health or wealth or education, are we great because we are the greatest military power this world has ever seen? We are, and we make a huge investment in maintaining that supremacy, spending three or four times as much on our armed forces as the next highest spender, China. But is this what we want to point to as the defining mark of our nation's greatness?

Maybe greatness is about something else, not about money or power, but about values. Are liberty and justice for all the marks of our greatness? But is there liberty, is there justice, equal justice, for all in this country, at this time?

Is it because of *e pluribus unum*, “out of many, one,” that we are a tapestry woven of many different peoples? We are *pluribus*, yes, but are we really *unum*? Are we a beautiful tapestry or a volatile mix of combustible elements? Do we value in practice what we claim to value in theory?

It seems that we are struggling to find a mark of the greatness of this nation, but I think we are getting closer. Maybe it is not attainment, but vision that makes us great, not the reality of our common life as it is, but the ideal toward which we strive. Is this the mark of a great nation, that it is always striving to be better than it is, refusing to settle for any manner of common life that falls short of the life we feel we are called, all humans beings are called, to live together?

What about Israel? What about the Israel Jeremiah calls the greatest of nations? What are the marks of Israel’s greatness?

To be truthful, calling Israel, then and there, the greatest of nations seems downright laughable. The Israel of Jeremiah’s day was defeated, humiliated, its people broken and demoralized and literally scattered. It was not a nation and it had no leader, and, as far as many of its people were concerned, it had no God.

How, then, can Jeremiah call Israel the greatest of nations? Israel is called great not because of its own achievement, but because of God’s choice, not because of their standing in the world, but because of the role God called them to fulfill in the world, a vital role in God’s grand design, to be played out not for their own sake, but for the sake of all the nations. They were called “greatest” because they were called “servant.” Their job was to bring blessing, to bring God, to the rest of humanity.

And the marks of this greatness?

*I will bring them from the north
and gather them from the ends of the earth.
The blind and the lame will come with them,
pregnant women and those about to give birth.
They will come back a great nation.*

“They will come back a great nation.” Whom? The blind and the lame and pregnant women. These are the only people, the only groups of people, who merit specific mention in Jeremiah’s list of the citizens of this great nation! People unable to see are an important part of this great nation. People unable to walk are an important part of this great nation. Pregnant women are an important part of this great nation.

Well, of course they are! You can’t grow a great nation without women giving birth. But it is more than that. Like people who are blind and people who are lame, pregnant women are vulnerable, easily exploited and abused, weak. In one sense, weak, yes, but in another sense, are not the people who have to live without seeing, the people who have to live without being able to walk, the people who endure long months of pregnancy and the perilous trauma of birthing especially strong?

In any case, it is clear that one mark of the greatness of this nation is inclusion. “No matter who you are ...” We say it. Every week it is there at the head of our bulletin. But greatness is not in saying it, but in living it. “No matter who you are.” What does it mean for a nation, for a people, for a church, for us, to really live that creed?

It is a mark of our nation’s greatness that we aspire to inclusion, that we intend to welcome all. And it also means that when we betray that value, when we turn our backs on any person or group of people -- because of ethnicity or religion or social standing or gender preference or immigration status or disability or mental illness or whatever -- we betray our mandate and lose any semblance of greatness we might have had. And, to be very clear, it is not welcoming them that makes our nation great. Our nation is great when they are part of us, when they are us.

The second mark of Israel’s greatness ...

*They will come back a great nation.
My people will return weeping,
praying as I lead them back.*

The mark of a great nation is ... weeping.

Are Israel’s tears, tears of joy, of relief, of gratitude as her people are finally brought home? Surely, yes, but, just as surely, this is not the whole of it. Israel’s tears are tears, too, of grief and sorrow and repentance, for the road they have traveled, for the way they have lived, for the suffering they have brought on themselves and on their children and on other people’s children.

They are tears of honesty, tears of humility, acknowledging their own frailty, acknowledging their own failure, acknowledging their utter dependence on God, that they are what they are only by God's grace, that they will be what they will be only by God's grace. They know it is God's grace that brings them home, and so they weep -- with sorrow for their lack of love for God, and with joy for God's love for them.

Our nation is great, too, not when when we flaunt our successes, but when we admit our failures, when we acknowledge our shortcomings. We are great when we know and when we admit, to ourselves and to any who are listening, that we are not yet great, but still flawed. We are great when we weep -- for the world as it is, and for ourselves as we are.

Humility is a mark of a nation's greatness, of a people's greatness, of a church's greatness. Isn't that why we did our fall worship series, experiencing for ourselves other ways of doing worship, other ways of being church, other ways of walking the same path -- to remind ourselves that it is not about us, but about the God who calls us, who calls all of us? To remind ourselves we are not there yet, we are not yet home, we are not yet great?

Will we be great? Any greatness we will have comes from God, from the God who calls us, the God who leads us, the God who brings us home. And when we finally do reach home? When God brings us at last to the place we belong, to the place all of us belong? What happens then?

Dancing! There will be dancing!