

The Greatness of God

I found myself absolutely captivated by a documentary on Netflix the other night. It's called *Chef's Table* and it highlights the work of some world-famous chefs. The episode that caught me is about the work of Massimo Botura in Modena. It begins with a compelling montage of images of the earthquakes in northern Italy in 2012. It was a surprising beginning, so much so that I took notice. The camera panned to wheels and wheels of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese that had toppled off of shelves.

I never knew how much a wheel of parm could weigh – many were over eighty pounds - that's an eleven-year-old. And there they were, lying askew on the ground; some broken, some damaged. It was clear that a collective effort within the local industry was needed to safeguard the authentic trademark of *Parmigiano-Reggiano*, which can only be produced in Parma, Reggio Emilia, Modena, Bologna and Mantua. This cheese is a cornerstone of the regional economy, with an annual turnover in the neighborhood of 1.2 billion euros. In the aftermath of the quake, more than 600 farms and 37 dairies had been affected, 600,000 cheeses fell (of which 120,000 were destroyed or melted). Damages totaled some 100 million euros. It could have ruined an entire industry.¹

I wanted to learn more, so I read about cheese standards, a topic I never thought I'd be researching. I learned that if the cheese was intact, it could continue to be aged and ultimately wear the prized brand of Parmigiano-Reggiano. But if the wheel cracked inside or the rind was broken, it could only be sold as un-aged hard cheese, no matter how good it smelled or how high the quality was.

Massimo developed a recipe, lightening quick, using an old favorite, *cacio e pepe*, a delicious comfort food of pasta with cheese and pepper, but he put a few twists in it. First, he made it a risotto, which was a staple grain of the area, and then he substituted the regular, run of the mill, roman hard cheese with, you guessed it, parmigiano-reggiano. And then, using the marvels of social media and other methods, he and others began to organize the largest national sit-down dinner ever... and you guessed it, serving risotto made with the damaged parmigiano-reggiano. NPR and other media outlets picked up the story.²

The end result was that not one local cheese-maker went out of business after the disaster. Massimo called it *social justice on global scale, done with food*.

Don't you just love the creativity and *heart* that such stories show us? Isn't it just amazing what humankind is capable of when we think, love, and work - in ways that are redemptive?

¹ WorldCrunch.com [The Miracle After Italy's "Parmesan Earthquake"](#)

² NPR.org, Published October 27, 2012

When I think of the transfiguration of Jesus, I imagine that my first reaction is much the same as most of yours, likely much the same as that handful of disciples that Jesus allowed to see him with Moses and Elijah. Namely, *this is not normal*. Nothing about this seems to point us toward the humanity of God. If anything, this story seems to point to the otherworldly, deeply different, utterly transcendent quality of God that cannot be grasped by human understanding.

A common interpretation of this text is that there are mountaintop experiences, and there are valley experiences and while we worship on the mountaintop and are simultaneously moved and transfixed, life happens in the valleys. Healing happens in the valleys.

And these are all well and good and true things to say. Life does have moments of extraordinary beauty. Life does have moments where healing is needed desperately. God is present in both... but that isn't the point of this text.

The point of this text, in this moment, in Luke, is to prefigure the death of Jesus.

Listen to what one New Testament scholar writes about this text, "...The only actor in the event is God...The God who *could* rescue the Son from suffering *confirms* for Jesus the way of the cross. This God also tells the disciples, who will soon face conditions that seem to derail, if not bring to an end, their hope in Jesus, that those very painful conditions do not lie *across* the way but *on* the way to the completion of God's purpose. This is a mountaintop experience but not the kind about which persons write glowingly of sunrises, soft breezes, warm friends, music and quiet time. On this mountain the subject is death, and the frightening presence of God reduces those present to silence. In due time, after the resurrection, they will remember, understand, and not feel heavy. In fact, they will tell it broadly as good news."³

This is a watershed moment. You know those moments, the ones where something of ultimate importance going on? They are the moments that clarify and distill what is important in our lives. And as hard as it can be to hear, this moment stands as an affirmation of the way of the cross. It is an affirmation of the humanity of God and the divinity of Jesus. It is an affirmation of the self-sacrificing love that changes the world. *It is also a moment when the greatness of God is seen in the humanity of Jesus.*

Let me tell you about a theological pet peeve of mine. I detest it when people excuse moral failures with the self-deprecating observation, "I'm only human."

There is nothing "only" about being human. And moral failures do not come as a result of the *fullness* of our humanity, but rather in the moments where we *fail to live up to the fullness* of our humanity. Wrong acts may occasionally describe humanity, but they never *define* humanity.

Indeed, to be human is to be called into that life of self-sacrifice shown to us in Jesus.

³ Fred Craddock. Luke in *Interpretation*. Mays, Miller, and Achtemeier, eds. (JKP: Louisville, 1990) p135. Division mine.

Now, before I go too far, I will readily acknowledge that there is tremendous debate about what it means to be fully human. I understand this. I wouldn't want to misrepresent it. As luminous of theologians as Karl Barth and John Calvin, in their respective centuries, disagreed about the capacity of humans to show the imprint of the divine in our being. This is grossly simplified, but Barth felt the imprint of God in creation is so shattered by sin that no conclusions about God are remotely possible based upon it. Calvin, writing centuries before and under no less gloomy circumstances, was not so sure.

But what they don't disagree on is this: Jesus reveals to us not only God, but also the fullness of human life.

And this moment of transfiguration on the mountaintop; it is a moment of epiphany. Moses and Elijah are there, but they are not Jesus. *It is Jesus who represents the totality of God's self-revelation.*

And I understand it is not just impracticable, it is impossible to suggest in the emulation of Jesus that we capture the revelation of God as shown in the transfiguration. I get that.

But it is *not* impossible to see the fullness of humanity in Jesus. And no more clearly do we see this than when Jesus's *first* action after this mountaintop experience, his first action as he continues on the road to the cross, is to reengage in the healing of the world as he heals a boy brought to him in spasms under the control of a demon.

Theologians may not be able to agree about the image of God on humankind, but we know exactly what humanity looks like in its fullest expression – it looks like Jesus.

Let me ask you something: Have you ever read one of the Gospels from cover to cover? I'm serious. I know we've read it piecemeal, because the lectionary dishes it up that way for us. But have you ever read one from start to finish? The longest one is Luke, its only 34 pages in the Bible right in front of you in the rack on your pew. Mark is the shortest, at twenty. If you read three pages of Mark per day, you'd be done in a week. And I know that there are passages that are hard to understand and need some interpretation... I get that. But if you just keep reading, you'll see some very clear themes emerge.

Here's what you'll see from Jesus if you take me up on the challenge to read a Gospel account: you'll see compassion for those who are suffering and anger at those who are causing it. You'll also see love for both parties.

That's a great baseline for life: To be compassionate to those who need it and to work against those who cause suffering, and to love everyone regardless.

That is what builds a common life together.

That is what works for the healing of the world.

And perhaps most to the point, it's what we are called, every one of us, to do so that we live into the fullness of our humanity.

So, back to Massimo's story. As he was talking in this documentary of the Osteria that he owns in Modena, he shared the story of a woman named Lidia.

Lidia is an elderly woman with failing eyesight who came to him one day seeking a job. She applied for a position in the kitchen and as he interviewed her and looked at her resume, she kept saying to him over and over again, "I am blind, my eyes are no good, but I can still make pasta." Finally, Massimo said to her, "Well, stop telling me what you can't do and show me what you can." She went to the workbench and mounded her flour, made a well in the middle and cracked her eggs, and began pulling the flour into the dough until she finished. Then she carefully she rolled it out, and by feel began cutting beautiful strips of pappardelle. The job was hers.

One day, she pulled the preeminent chef aside and said she needed to tell him something. She said, "You're doing it wrong. First thing, always, before the dinner service, first thing, before the first bit of work for the evening should begin, bring everyone, the cooks, the waiters, the dishwashers, the chefs together, bring everyone together and feed them a proper meal."

Friends, we are, every single one of us, called to think, love and work for the redemption of the world, to join in Jesus's work of showing compassion to those who need it and to work against those who cause suffering, all while loving everyone. We are called, every one of us – I say this gently but truthfully – we are called, *every* one of us, to do the work of Jesus – No one else can live your calling for you. We are called to do the work of showing compassion to those who suffer and to work against those who cause suffering. And before we do, before the first bit of work can be done, we are called to sit down at this table, every one of us, and have a proper meal.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.