

“Partners in faith: Caleb”

Numbers 13:26-33”

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The Lord said to Moses, “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders.” There were twelve tribes. Twelve leaders representing each of the twelve tribes went out to explore the land of Canaan. We know Canaan by a more familiar name. We know Canaan as the Promised Land. The Promised Land is a land of milk and honey. The twelve go to the Promised Land. The twelve explore the Promised Land. The twelve bring a sign of the fertility of the Promised Land. The twelve bring back a cluster of grapes, some pomegranates, and some figs. The twelve bring back a report. The report the twelve bring back says, “The land to which you sent us does flow with milk and honey.” And then the twelve show the fruit they brought back from the land of milk and honey. But the twelve also reported something dreadful. You see, in this land of milk and honey there were giants. And so the twelve concluded their report with these words. “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” The twelve not only make this fearful report, the twelve then proceed to spread this bad report among the Israelites. The twelve even said, “The land we explored devours those living in it... We saw giants there, and they were so big that in comparison we seemed like grasshoppers.”

This episode, chronicled in great detail in Numbers chapters 13 and 14, is the reason the Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness. The report of the twelve, the bad report of the twelve, turns the people against Moses and against Aaron and in a very real sense against God. The people doubt that God can lead them into the Promised Land. How can grasshoppers conquer giants? Fear wins the day. As happened so often in that wilderness experience, the Israelites hear the bad report from the twelve and they say, “If only we had died in Egypt.” Oh, not that old trope. The way ahead is full of challenge so the first

thing out of their mouths is, “If only we had died in Egypt.” God sees their utter and complete lack of faith and says, “Not a one of you will see this Promised Land.” For forty years these disobedient people will wander in the wilderness, and it will not be until a completely new generation has arisen that they will finally enter the Promised Land.

Today I want to talk to you about footprints. Today I want to talk to you about the footprints of giants. Those twelve leaders of the Israelites journeyed into the Promised Land and when they saw the footprints of giants, they quivered with fear and their faith failed. If that is all that happened, I don't know that I would want to talk to you today about footprints. If all that happened is the twelve saw giant footprints and cowered in fear, the sermon would be short and to the point. Don't fear giant footprints. Look what happens when you fear giant footprints. You wander forty years and never get to the Promised Land.

Today I want to talk to you about footprints, about giant footprints, but I do not want to talk to you about the giant footprints of the giants who occupied the Promised Land. I want to talk to you about the giant footprints of one of the twelve who journeyed into the Promised Land. His name was Caleb. Twelve leaders of the twelve tribes walked into the Promised Land. They all left a set of footprints. All twelve were just normal footprints of normal people. No one had giant footprints. But when the twelve returned and made their bad report, those of us watching from the outside, those of us listening in to this story, those of us reading this passage some three thousand years later, notice something about the man named Caleb. It turns out Caleb had the footprints of a giant.

When the twelve reported that there were giants in the land, and that there was no hope that a band of grasshoppers could conquer an army of giants, Caleb stepped up and said something. When Caleb stepped up his step left a giant footprint. Caleb heard the bad report. Then Caleb silenced the people and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” Caleb set his foot

down. You could see the difference between his footprint and the footprint of the others among the twelve. Later Caleb will speak again, and again we will see that his words leave a giant footprint. “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them...the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them...of those giants.” (Numbers 14:7-9)

Today I want to talk to you about footprints, about giant footprints. But I have to be honest about this story. Even though Caleb left a giant footprint, the people still rebelled and because of their rebellion they wandered forty years in the wilderness. So much for giant footprints, eh? Well, don't be so quick to dismiss the giant footprints of Caleb. As the story unfolds the twelve make a bad report and we find out Caleb steps out of the shadow of the twelve and leaves his giant footprint. Then, the next time Caleb speaks he is not alone. Now another one of the twelve has joined him. That other one of the twelve who joins him is Hoshea, the son of Nun, from the tribe of Ephraim. Hoshea the son of Nun is not simply a footnote in the story of the giant footprint of Caleb. Here in Numbers, as the twelve leaders of the tribes are introduced, we discover Hoshea is not a footnote through a footnote in this passage. The footnote about Hoshea says, “Moses gave Hoshea son of Nun the name Joshua.” Oh, Joshua. That Joshua. Initially, only Caleb speaks up and leaves his giant footprint. Then Joshua joins Caleb and Joshua also leaves a giant footprint. Just ask the people of Jericho how big the footprint is of the man named Joshua. Even though Caleb's giant footprint doesn't influence the whole Israelite community, he does influence Joshua. But most importantly, Caleb's giant footprint is noticed by God. Here in these critical chapters in the book of Numbers, when almost the whole community turns away from God, fearful of the giants, God says this about Caleb: “Caleb has a different spirit. Caleb follows me wholeheartedly.” Today I want to talk to you about giant footprints, and

I want to simply say, “Those who follow God wholeheartedly leave giant footprints.”

I walked in the footprints of a giant once. I brought a picture of the giant so that you could get a sense of what I mean when I say I walked in the footprints of a giant. In my picture are two men. The tall one is 7’2”. The shorter one is 5’10”. The tall one in the picture, the one who is 7’2” is named Kareem Abdul Jabbar. The short one in the picture, the one who is 5’10” is John Wooden. I walked in the footprints of a giant once, and his name was John Wooden. Yeah, the one in the picture who is 5’10”. John Wooden was a teacher. John Wooden was a coach. Most notably, John Wooden coached at UCLA and made literally a giant impact on the world of college basketball. In fact, John Wooden made a giant impact on the entire athletic world. In 2009 a survey listed John Wooden as the greatest coach of all-time in American athletics. Yeah, Coach Wooden left a giant footprint, and I got to walk in his footprints.

UCLA basketball meant the world to me as a young man. I followed every game and knew every player and leapt for joy with every victory and sunk to the lowest levels of despair with every defeat, and along the way I held the greatest admiration and respect for Coach John Wooden. John Wooden retired from coaching in 1975...fittingly after winning one final championship. In retirement he stayed connected to UCLA. Because of that when our high school took a field trip to visit colleges during my junior year, and we were walking across the campus at UCLA, it took my breath away when I saw a giant walking on the track right before my very eyes. Coach Wooden, in a sweatsuit, looking for all the world like a 5’10” man in his late 60’s, was walking on the track. I left my group of friends and raced to the track. But like those Israelites who saw the giants in the Promised Land, I was intimidated by the giant before my eyes, by the giant who was all of 5’10” tall. So I fell behind him on the track. For 440 yards, one loop around the track, I walked about five feet behind Coach John Wooden. I never said hi. I never introduced myself. But for a few minutes on a spring afternoon in sunny southern California, I walked in the footprints of a giant.

If John Wooden was just a legendary coach, I wouldn't make you listen to my childhood remembrances. But something happened 25 years after John Wooden retired from coaching that cemented in my mind the realization that Coach Wooden was a giant. Coach Wooden retired in 1975. In March of 2000, I opened my *Sports Illustrated* magazine and came upon an article by Rick Reilly. The article began, "On Tuesday the best man I know will do what he always does on the 21st of the month. He'll sit down and pen a love letter to his best girl. He'll say how much he misses her and loves her and can't wait to see her again. Then he'll fold it once, slide it in a little envelope and walk into his bedroom. He'll go to the stack of love letters sitting there on her pillow, untie the yellow ribbon, place the new one on top and tie the ribbon again. The stack will be 180 letters high then, because Tuesday is 15 years to the day since Nellie, his beloved wife of 53 years, died. In her memory, he sleeps only on his half of the bed, only on his pillow, only on top of the sheets, never between, with just the old bedspread they shared to keep him warm."¹ Rick Reilly finishes that touching introduction with these words, "There's never been a finer man in American sports than John Wooden." In other words, Rick Reilly is saying John Wooden was a giant. But now the giant isn't a giant because of victories and championships and trophies and honors like being the greatest coach of all-time. Now Coach Wooden is a giant because he is a husband, like so many husbands, who simply loves his wife. And he misses his wife...terribly. So he writes her a letter on the 21st day of each month. Here on Valentine's Day, we see Coach Wooden as a giant because he understood, "Love never fails." When I walked in the footprints of John Wooden, I really did walk in the footprints of a giant, a giant who was just a man married to a woman whom he still loved long after she had died and left his side.

In this picture I have of Coach Wooden, he is standing next to a literal giant. The picture is from the cover of the book written by the taller man, the one named Kareem Abdul Jabbar. The book is titled, "Coach Wooden and Me." Kareem played for Coach Wooden from

¹ Rick Reilly, "A Paragon Above the Madness," *Sports Illustrated*, March 14, 2000.

1966-1969. Those were turbulent times in America. UCLA is in Los Angeles. Los Angeles was the scene of the Watts race riots. Kareem was involved in the civil rights movement and he took stands that were both courageous and unpopular. Kareem did not play for the USA in the 1968 Olympics. That did not sit well with a lot of people. As Kareem recounts his complicated relationship as a black man with a white coach in racially charged times, you realize giants are ordinary people, and sometimes they disappoint you. Kareem portrays times he was disappointed in Coach Wooden, looking for Coach to take a stronger stand against racial prejudice and injustice. In particular, Kareem always wondered how Coach Wooden felt about his decision not to play in the Olympics. "I had the feeling that he disapproved (of my decision not to play in the Olympics). He was a very patriotic man. He had been a lieutenant in the Navy during World War II. I couldn't imagine him endorsing my refusal to play in the Olympics." And then Kareem writes, "I found out years later just how wrong I was."

A woman wrote John Wooden a letter during that time of the 1968 Olympics. The woman complained about the decision of Kareem not to participate in the Olympics. Years later the woman mailed to Kareem the response she had received from Coach Wooden.

Dear Mrs. Hough,

The comments of this most unusual young man also disturbed me, but I have seen him hurt so much by the remarks of white people that I am probably more tolerant than most. I have heard remarks within his hearing such as "Hey, look at that big black freak," "Did you ever see such a big (N word)?" and others of a similar nature...

The letter ends with Coach Wooden defending Kareem Abdul Jabbar by writing, "You may not have seen or read about the later interview when he said that there were so many things wrong at present of the treatment of his race in this country that it was difficult for him to claim it as his own. Thank you for your interest, John Wooden."² Kareem said he read

² Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, "Coach Wooden and Me," p.142, 143

the letter. Then he read it again. And then again. He thought to himself, “Oh, Coach, I wish I had known how you felt. If only to ease the burden you’d taken on to defend me.”

Coach Wooden did not lead protest marches during those turbulent times of racial unrest. And yet you get the very real sense that the letter he wrote to one woman criticizing a famous black athlete who played under him as a coach made a difference...the woman sent the letter to Kareem years later. When one life is changed, when one attitude is changed, that is a giant footprint.

But there is more. In 2008 Kareem interviewed Coach Wooden for a documentary film. By this point Coach was nearing 100 years of age. During the interview, in which Coach Wooden surprised Kareem by quoting a lengthy poem by the great black poet Langston Hughes, Coach told Kareem a story he had never told him in all their years together. “You know, back in 1947 when I was in my first year coaching at Indiana State Teachers College...we had just won the Indiana Intercollegiate Conference title and the NAIA invited us to play in the National Basketball Tournament in Kansas City. It was a pretty big deal to the team and the school.” And then Coach continued, “But they had one condition I couldn’t bring Clarence Walker because he was black.” This opened the door for Coach to tell of traveling with a team that included a black player in 1947 and how they came to a restaurant and the waitress said she would not serve Clarence and how Coach got the whole team up and they left that restaurant. Kareem asked Coach Wooden, “What did you do about the ultimatum from the Tournament?” Coach said, “Same thing I did at the restaurant. I told them we all play or none of us play.” Well, the tournament would not yield, and so none of the team played. The story ends by Coach Wooden saying, “The next year we won again, the Tournament changed its policy and we played.” Kareem, mesmerized by this revelation of a social justice moment that occurred sixty years before asked his Coach, “What happened to Clarence Walker?” Coach Wooden said, “First African-American to

play in a postseason intercollegiate basketball tournament.”³ Kareem never saw his coach march in a protest, but late in life he discovered that Coach Wooden, in his own way, had left some giant footprints in the battle against racial injustice.

Toward the end of his life Coach Wooden was surrounded by some of his players from the good old days. It was a sentimental time. The coach was now 98 years old. As Coach Wooden spoke to this gathering of friends Kareem heard him say something that made his stomach tighten. Coach Wooden said to these ones who had learned so much from him, “Guys, I made a mistake...I made a mistake with the Pyramid of Success.” John Wooden was noted for developing his Pyramid of Success. I have that Pyramid right here in my copy of “They Call Me Coach”, the autobiography John Wooden wrote. There are fifteen blocks in the Pyramid, a base of five with things such as Friendship, Loyalty, Cooperation, a second set of blocks with Initiative and Intentness, a third level with Condition, Skill, Team Spirit, the penultimate level has Poise and Confidence, and at the top is Competitive Greatness. Now at 98 years old, reflecting on his life, his career, and his famous Pyramid of Success, Coach John Wooden said, “Guys, I made a mistake with the Pyramid of Success.” As Kareem and all these others who had known all the success of this giant of a man leaned in and listened intently, their coach apologized and said that when he developed his pyramid with fifteen blocks, he left something important out. Now at the end of his life he apologized and he wanted to rectify his mistake. Coach Wooden told the gathered group, “I left the word love out. And love is the most important word in our language.” Coach Wooden was many things, but the most important thing in his life was his faith in Jesus Christ. He confessed that he made a mistake. He apologized for making that mistake. And he let these dear friends know his mistake, which was leaving out the most important thing, the word love.

³ “Coach Wooden and Me”, p. 149-151.

Caleb was a giant not because he had a giant footprint, but because he was wholeheartedly devoted to God. Coach Wooden was a giant not because he had a giant footprint, but because he realized the greatest thing is love.

You and I are not called to be giants. Like Coach Wooden we're more like 5'10, teachers, coaches, husbands, wives, mothers, sisters, brothers, fathers, friends, people who are put in situations where we can defend others, sometimes by walking out of a restaurant, sometimes by saying no, the whole team plays or none of us plays, sometimes by writing a letter gently trying to help others understand the bigger picture, sometimes writing a letter to our loved one and placing it on their pillow...sometimes even doing that long after they have left our side...sometimes by admitting we made a mistake...we made a pyramid with all sorts of good things...but we forgot the greatest, which is love. Here on Valentine's Day in the year 2021, I would like to end my sermon with a giant footprint, a footprint left for us in the bible. Although it truly is a giant footprint, it is a footprint we can all claim as our own...if we just let love be the most important thing.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. Love does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

Let that be your footprint. If you let that be your footprint, you will have the footprint of a giant.