

Aunt Elizabeth: She Played Second Fiddle

[Luke 1:5-7](#); [Luke 1:24-25](#); [Luke 1:39-45](#); [Luke 1:57-66](#)

The Christmas Pageant

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

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Elizabeth is one of my favorite people. And not just because she was "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord" as Luke puts it here in his first chapter. That's noteworthy, but that's not why I admire her. I look up to Elizabeth because she didn't insist on being looked up to. She was a celebrity in her home town; everyone was looking up to Elizabeth. But when Mary showed up at her door, Elizabeth quickly put her fame aside so she could minister to Mary.

You see, what was a source of untainted joy to Elizabeth was a source of unwanted anxiety to Mary. Both women were pregnant unexpectedly, Elizabeth because she was old and barren, Mary because she was young and unmarried. To Elizabeth pregnancy meant the end of shame, because back then it was humiliating for a woman to go through life without children. To Mary pregnancy meant the beginning of shame, because everyone knew she was unmarried at the time of her baby's conception. Yes, she knew that her baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but how do you explain that to all those self-righteous busy-bodies who love nothing more than a juicy bit of scandal? "Conceived by the Holy Spirit, Mary? Who do you think you're kidding?" So Mary fled from her gossiping neighbors to seek refuge with her older and wiser aunt. And Elizabeth promptly deferred her own happiness so she could put her caring arms around her anxious kinswoman.

A lesser person might have been envious of Mary, because Mary was carrying the long-awaited Messiah. But, says our text, "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (1:41) and the Holy Spirit is a generous and caring Spirit. So Elizabeth, filled with this caring Spirit, blesses Mary, affirms that her baby is to be Israel's Lord, and reinforces Mary's faith in God's promise: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." There is not a shred of envy in Elizabeth, only delight that Mary's mission from God is greater than her own.

Now fast forward thirty years and watch Elizabeth's son John, as he ponders Mary's son Jesus. More and more people were leaving John and flocking to Jesus, and John's supporters were upset: "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him." (John 3:26) What they didn't say but clearly implied was, "You were here first, John! So what right does Jesus have to invade your turf?" To which John replied, "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said (I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.) He must increase, but I must decrease." Where did John learn such humility? From his mother, of course. Elizabeth didn't have to be Number One, nor did her son John.

Nor, for that matter, did Jesus. Early on, Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. "You can be Number One, Jesus, if you will just fall down and worship me." Jesus flatly rejected the offer. After feeding the five thousand, people tried to make him king by acclamation, but Jesus slipped through the crowd and went off on a private retreat. On Palm Sunday the crowds hailed him as their Messiah. But he made nothing of it. According to Mark, "when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." A week later, Pilate gave him one last chance to be Number One: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not from this world."

If anyone could have taken the gold medal in every category of life, it was Jesus. But, Paul writes, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7-8) Jesus left his glory behind so he could stoop and put his saving arms around the world. Jesus did not have to be Number One. Do you?

At the office party last week, when a colleague talked about their latest achievement, did you have to top their story? When a friend began bragging about her kids, could you not wait to pull out your pictures? When a neighbor bought a bigger house, a more luxurious car, or the latest cyber toy for grown-ups, did you have to go them one better? The film "Amadeus" is a vivid commentary on the destructive power of envy. Antonio Salieri is the competent but not especially brilliant conductor of the Vienna opera when Mozart suddenly bursts on the scene with his superb compositions and his childish hi jinks. Salieri is madly jealous and does everything he can to discredit his younger competitor. On one occasion he visits Mozart's apartment and spots a manuscript containing a full orchestral score without a single erasure on it. When he learns that this is the first draft, that Mozart creates complete scores without a single error or correction, Salieri is beside himself. He cannot believe that God would shower such genius on a playboy when he, Salieri, has lived such a disciplined life. In any other era, Salieri would be highly honored. But as long as Mozart lives, Salieri will play second fiddle, and that is something he cannot stand. The film leads us to believe that Salieri orchestrated the events that claimed Mozart's life at the age of thirty-five. Such is the destructive power of envy.

Now let me give you the other side of the coin. When I interviewed with the pastor nominating committee at my former church in 1986, I learned that Dr. Wilson Kilgore, my predecessor, had retired and was living in the neighborhood. So among other questions I asked what his attitude would be toward me if I were to come. The committee wasn't sure what I was concerned about, but they put the issue to Dr. Kilgore anyway. "Oh," he said, "I know what Tom is talking about. You tell him that I won't interfere in any way with his ministry. If people call me for weddings or funerals, I will gently tell them that I am no longer the church's pastor, and refer them to Tom." And he was absolutely true to his word. When I asked Wilson's permission to share that story, and he told me to add this proverb: "When you climb out of the swimming pool, the water quickly closes in behind you, and the pool doesn't even know you were there." That's stretching it a bit. Wilson was pastor of that church for over fourteen years, and his ripples were still in the pool. Yet when he retired, he didn't have to be Number One.

By putting her arms around Mary, Elizabeth showed that she didn't have to be Number One either. Then, after the birth of her son John, she fades from the biblical story and we never hear of her again. And that may be the mark of true greatness. Greatness is not how big a splash you make in the pool, but rather how you help others stay afloat. And then, when you have finished the job, to climb out and make room for someone else. By that criterion, how great are you?