

MLK Sunday - 2019
using excerpts from 'The Drum Major Instinct'
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So I'm doing things a little differently today.
Of course, a lot of things are different today — you're in folding chairs, not pews,
you get to have coffee during worship, not just after,
which I personally think should be a permanent change.
And my sermon today is different, too.
On this weekend when we are asked to pause and remember
a man who gave his life in the pursuit of equality,
today I'm sharing my sermon with him.
Today you'll hear not just my words but the words of Martin Luther King.

We know him, of course, as the face of the Civil Rights Movement,
as the man who led thousands in non-violent protest,
who courageously endured the humiliation of Birmingham jail;
we know him as the powerful orator who stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and
spoke of his dream
in words that have echoed through generations,
words we still desperately need to hear,
as yesterday's confrontations in that same spot made clear.
We know him as a martyr for justice,
and an inspiration to millions.

But first and foremost Martin Luther King Junior
was a Christian, a pastor who knew the Bible through and through.
He was a gifted theologian and scriptural scholar
whose writings on Christianity and the church continue to inspire.
And he was an extraordinary preacher,
who did what we're called to do as preachers:
take the stories of Jesus and make them live into our lives today.
And that's what I want you to hear today.

This week, I was getting ready for SPF, our high school youth group.
Every SPF meeting has a time for devotions —
some scripture I want to share, or a story to tell.
This week it seemed only right to share words from the Rev. King.

So I listened to a bunch of audio clips,
and I picked a 90-second clip to share with the kids,
a few sentences on the meaning of true greatness,
taken from a sermon that was preached in early 1968.
It was a good 90 seconds.
But later that night I sat down with headphones on
and I listened to the whole sermon.
The Drum Major Instinct, it was called.
And today I want you to hear it — not all 38 minutes, but some.

It's a sermon based on the scripture story that [Witt/Devenny] just read to you.
Now this is a story that I myself have preached on only once in my 30 years here.
It's about two of Jesus' disciples, and frankly they're behaving in a less than inspiring way in
this story.

They're two brothers, James and John,
and they come to Jesus with a pretty obnoxious request.
They've figured out that Jesus really is the Messiah,
and to their mind that means that he's on his way to being King of Israel,
like, *really* King.

Like beat-back-the-Romans kind of king.
So they say to him, *hey, when all this goes down,*
and you're the King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
the two of us want to be seated at your right hand and left hand.

In other words, we want to be right at the top with you.

And Jesus says to them this:

whoever wants to be great must be servant of all.

Whoever wants to be great must be servant of all.

The one and only time I preached on this passage
was very early on in my ministry.

And back then I was a very stern and judgmental preacher.

I really was.

I did a lot of scolding in my sermons,
because, you see, I had just graduated from Yale Divinity School
and therefore I knew everything.

And at age 26 I had experienced enough of life that I could comment on everyone else's.

So when I preached on this passage,

I spoke about how terrible James and John were for wanting

to be special and important and in charge.

And I said that we too were terrible.

Because we were just like that.

It was a sermon designed to make everyone ponder all the ways in which they had let God down

by being, as I said in my closing paragraph, *more James than Jesus*.

What I want to share with you now is what Martin Luther *King* did with this story.

It was pretty different.

What he did was to say, you know, we've *all* got that James and John tendency to want power. So let's not condemn that *drum major instinct*. Because it's human nature.

Let's look instead at what Jesus does to transform it.

Let's look at the transformative power of Christ.

I'm going to turn you over now to the words of the Rev. King:

[VIDEO TRANSCRIPT]

"This morning I would like to use as a subject from which to preach:

"The Drum Major Instinct."

"The Drum Major Instinct."

And our text for the morning is taken from a very familiar passage in the tenth chapter as recorded by Saint Mark.

Now very quickly, we would automatically condemn James and John, and we would say they were selfish.

Why would they make such a selfish request?

But before we condemn them too quickly,

let us look calmly and honestly at ourselves,

and we will discover that we too have those same basic desires for recognition, for importance.

That same desire for attention,

that same desire to be first.

Of course, the other disciples got mad with James and John, and you could understand why, but we must understand

that we have some of the same James and John qualities.

*And there is deep down within all of us an instinct. It's a kind of drum major instinct—
a desire to be out front,
a desire to lead the parade,
a desire to be first.*

*And it is something that runs the whole gamut of life. And so before we condemn them,
let us see that we all have the drum major instinct. We all want to be important,
to surpass others,
to achieve distinction,
to lead the parade.*

*But let me rush on to my conclusion,
because I want you to see what Jesus was really saying.*

What was the answer that Jesus gave these men?

It's very interesting.

*One would have thought that Jesus would have condemned them. One would have thought
that Jesus would have said,*

"You are out of your place.

You are selfish.

Why would you raise such a question?" But that isn't what Jesus did;

he did something altogether different. He said in substance,

"Oh, I see, you want to be first.

You want to be great.

You want to be important.

You want to be significant.

Well, you ought to be.

If you're going to be my disciple, you must be." But he reordered priorities.

And he said, "Yes, don't give up this instinct. It's a good instinct if you use it right.

It's a good instinct if you don't distort it and pervert it. Don't give it up.

Keep feeling the need for being important.

Keep feeling the need for being first.

But I want you to be first in love.

I want you to be first in moral excellence. I want you to be first in generosity.

That is what I want you to do."

And he transformed the situation

by giving a new definition of greatness. And you know how he said it?

He said, "Now brethren, I can't give you greatness. And really, I can't make you first."

This is what Jesus said to James and John.

"You must earn it.

True greatness comes not by favoritism, but by fitness. And the right hand and the left are not mine to give, they belong to those who are prepared."

And so Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful.

If you want to be recognized—wonderful.

If you want to be great—wonderful.

But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness.

And this morning, the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness,

it means that everybody can be great,

because everybody can serve.

You don't have to have a college degree to serve.

You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.

You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve.

You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve.

You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve.

You only need a heart full of grace,

a soul generated by love.

And you can be that servant.

Those last words are the words I shared at SPF;
those last words are the words that hung in the air.

**Everybody can be great,
because everybody can serve.**

And I said to the teens in the room that night that I thought they were great.

Not because of what schools they're getting into
or what teams they're on.

But because I've seen them caring for kids in the slums of India,
and I've seen them building homes in Appalachia.

I've seen them carrying plates of food to the hungry in Bridgeport.

And I've watched them treat each other with kindness,
and embrace the stranger and respect the other.

I've seen them be servants, I said.
That's what makes you great, I said.

If you listen to the rest of the sermon some time, and you should, you'll hear King speak with poignancy and prophetic power about what happens when we lose sight of Christ's definition of greatness. What happens when the drum major instinct leads people to claim superiority over others. It is, you'll find, a timeless sermon in its reminder of where we go wrong. Fifty years later, it still feels all too timely.

But most of all,
the sermon is timeless in its reminder of the transformative power of Christ to turn this world's definitions upside down,
and to turn our lives right side up.
To take our very human yearning for greatness, our very human weakness,
and to transform it into the desire to serve.

Just one month ago,
in the darkness of the sanctuary,
we lit our candles on Christmas Eve and said these words:
we can be the light of the world.
We can be the city set on the hill for all to see.

Today, on this Martin Luther King weekend,
we remember the truth of those words
as we remember
that we can be great — that everybody can be great —
because we can serve.
Because we can serve.

This sermon was the last that Rev. King was to preach from the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church before he was killed.
And in the closing words of the sermon, he said this:
"If any of you are around on the day when I have to meet my death,
I want you to be able to say

that I *was* a drum major: a drum major for justice.

That I was a drum major for peace.

I was a drum major for righteousness.

Yes, Jesus," he said, "Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right side, on your left side, in love and truth and in commitment to others.

So that we can make of this old world a *new* world."

Therein lies greatness.

Amen.