

January 15, 2023

Honoring the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A Drum Major for Justice

Mark 10:35-45

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." ³⁶ And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" ³⁷ And they said to him, "Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." ³⁸ But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" ³⁹ They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. ⁴³ But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many."

Sermon: A Drum Major for Justice

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

The Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in Washington DC opened in October of 2011. Originally, there was one quote, carved into the stone bearing his likeness, that was removed two years later. The quote said, "I was a drum major for justice, peace, and righteousness." The reason it was removed was because it was a paraphrase, not an actual quote, of something he said just two months before he was killed.

He was preaching at Ebenezer Baptist Church, February 4, 1968. The title of his sermon was the "Drum Major Instinct."¹ His sermon for the day was a reworking of a sermon written by J. Wallace Hamilton in 1952 titled, "Drum-Major Instincts."² The scripture reading for both sermons was the one we just heard read from the Gospel of Mark.

¹ A copy of the full text of this sermon is available at: <https://bethlehemfarm.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/DrumMajorInstinct.pdf>

² This sermon can be found in the 1952 publication of "Ride the Wild Horses" by J Wallace Hamilton at: <https://archive.org/details/ridewildhorsesch0000hami>

James and John are walking along with Jesus, and they have a request. “Here’s what we want you to do for us,” they begin. They are thinking about their futures, making sure Jesus understands their aspirations. And what do they want? They want to be out front and in charge. They want the glory, the power, the greatness of being on Jesus’ right and left when he comes into power and reigns supreme as the new king of Israel.

They want the attention. They want the recognition. They want the accolades. They want to be important. They want the influence. They want to be somebody. They want 250,000 followers and a million “likes.” They want a building with their names emblazoned on the side. They want the award that says, “You’re number 1.” They want the fancy cars and designer clothes and latest gadgets. They expect Jesus to give it to them.

It’s tempting to condemn James and John as selfish. But instead, let’s take an honest look at ourselves. Don’t we, after all, share some of those same desires? That is the drum major instinct. It’s deep within all of us and it is the desire to be out front, lead the parade, to be significant. This instinct, if not harnessed can lead to boasting and self-importance. This instinct, if not harnessed, can lead one to lie about who they know to inflate their own importance. This instinct, if not harnessed, can lead one to tear others down to elevate themselves. This instinct, if not harnessed, can lead someone who is not getting enough attention through appropriate channels to act out, even commit heinous crimes, to get attention. This instinct, this drum major instinct, if not harnessed can lead to what King called, “snobbish exclusivism,” where one gets to decide who is in and who is out. This instinct, if not harnessed, can lead to racial prejudice and a need for some people to feel superior. The drum major instinct can even play out between nations.

James and John, jockeying for position, provided the opportunity for Jesus to say something about true greatness. Notice that Jesus didn’t chastise them for their request. He didn’t condemn them. He didn’t question them? No, Jesus did something altogether different.

Here is how Dr. King describes the scene:

[Jesus] 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...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.”

King continues:

And he transformed the situation by giving a new definition 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 is the new definition of greatness.

Dr. King went on to tell the congregation that he liked that definition because it means that everyone can be great. You don't need fancy degrees, or lots of followers, all you need is "a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love, and you can be that servant."

Dr. King went on to preach about Jesus being that kind of servant. According to worldly standards, Jesus was a failure. He was misunderstood, betrayed, abandoned, arrested and killed. And yet he remains one of the most influential people in human history.

As Dr. King moved to his conclusion, he started to talk about his own funeral, and how he'd like to be remembered. "Don't bother mentioning his Nobel Peace Prize, or degrees, or awards – those things are not what is important," those things don't define us, he said.

Here is how Dr. King wanted to be remembered:

- *I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others.*
- *I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody.*
- *I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question.*
- *I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.*
- *And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.*
- *I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.*
- *I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.*

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter.

It begs the question: How would you like to be remembered?

On January 2, I woke up and turned on the Rose Parade, paying special attention to the marching bands that had to do God knows how many fundraisers just to be there. Not all, but many of the bands were led by drum majors, with tall furry hats, high struts, and a mace. The mace, or baton, is their symbol of authority. The drum major is out front and in charge. It is more than a prestigious title. The drum major bears the responsibility of promoting cohesion and excellence from band members. Some put on quite a show.

There is nothing wrong with being a drum major unless you make it all about you.

When we harness our need to be important, or superior, or right...when we harness our egos always crying out for attention, when we harness that drum major instinct, we start to recognize what is true greatness.

Jesus didn't have a furry hat or a high step. He didn't carry a mace. He carried a cross, which is for us, a symbol of his willingness to give his life for the cause of love. Called a troublemaker and rabblouser, he was humiliated and cut down. What looked like the ultimate defeat was his moment of glory.

When our egos are in the driver's seat of our lives, it's hard to imagine the greatness Jesus describes.

James and John couldn't imagine it. Jesus had just told him he was going to be killed in Jerusalem, but they couldn't hear it. But instead of tearing into them, Jesus uses the moment to teach, them and us.

I didn't read all the details about the controversy leading to the removal of the quote from Dr. King's memorial. Maybe it is because it sounded presumptive and declarative, as if he was saying that about himself when what he was really saying is that is how he would like to be remembered. He wasn't perfect. He stood on the shoulders of many, building upon the labor and wisdom of others. Yet, the spotlight of history shined on him, to lead us and guide us in the way of love. "Everyone can be great," he said, "because everyone can serve."

Inspired by Martin Luther King Jr., may we aspire to such greatness.

Song – Band and Choir

"Tear Down the Walls"

Invite to Communion - Dayna

Dr. King popularized the term, "The Beloved Community."

The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence, derived from Jesus, Gandhi, and others.

Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

King believed that conflicts can be resolved peacefully, and adversaries can be reconciled through a mutual, determined commitment to nonviolence. No conflict, he believed, need erupt in violence. And all conflicts in The Beloved Community should end with reconciliation of adversaries, cooperating, in a spirit of friendship and goodwill.

The goal of all nonviolent action is the Beloved Community.

During the Montgomery boycott, King crystallized six principles for nonviolent action:

PRINCIPLE ONE: Nonviolence Is a Way of Life for Courageous People.

It is active nonviolent resistance to evil.
It is aggressive spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.

PRINCIPLE TWO: Nonviolence Seeks to Win Friendship and Understanding.

The outcome of nonviolence is the creation of the Beloved Community.
The end result of nonviolence is redemption and reconciliation

PRINCIPLE THREE: Nonviolence Seeks to Defeat Injustice, or Evil, Not People.

Nonviolence recognizes that evildoers are also victims and are not evil people.
The nonviolent resister seeks to defeat evil not persons victimized by evil.

PRINCIPLE FOUR: Nonviolence Holds That Unearned, Voluntary Suffering for a Just Cause Can Educate and Transform People and Societies.

Nonviolence is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation; to accept blows without striking back.
Nonviolence is a willingness to accept violence if necessary but never inflict it.
Nonviolence holds that unearned suffering for a cause is redemptive and has tremendous educational and transforming possibilities.

PRINCIPLE FIVE: Nonviolence Chooses Love Instead of Hate.

Nonviolence resists violence of the spirit as well as the body.
Nonviolent love is spontaneous, unselfish, and creative.

PRINCIPLE SIX: Nonviolence Believes That the Universe Is on the Side of Justice.

The nonviolent resister has deep faith that justice will eventually win.
Nonviolence believes that God is a God of justice.

The core value of the quest for Dr. King's Beloved Community was agape love which he described as "understanding, redeeming goodwill for all," an "overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative"... "the love of God operating in the human heart." He said that "Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend

and enemy; it is directed toward both...Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community.”

King was firm believer that the means must agree with the ends. In his letter from the Birmingham jail he wrote: “I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends.”

Every week, we come to this table to reconnect....to commune....with God and with one another. It is a celebration of that agape love...a commitment to justice...and a testament to the power of sacrificial love. Every week, we get a foretaste of beloved community, where all are welcome, all are equal, and everyone has enough, and we remember that agape love and nonviolence are the only way to achieve it.