

“Greatness is Serving”

Now to start my sermon off this morning I want you all to think back to last year’s Super Bowl. Do you remember who was playing? That’s right. The Philadelphia Eagles and the New England Patriots. Do you remember who won? That’s right, the Eagles. I honestly thought it was the Patriots who had won. I had to fact check myself just to make sure. Well, do you remember the commercials? Some of you may or may not remember this, but I remember it vividly, only because I found this commercial in particular to be strange and out of place. During the commercials Ram Trucks featured a portion of a sermon from Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. titled, “The Drum Major Instincts,” a metaphor to the desire to be out front, and a desire to lead the parade.

The ad begins by noting that King delivered the sermon — known as “The Drum Major Instinct” — on Feb. 4, 1968, 50 years ago. The ad continues to show Americans experiencing moments of struggle, such as a sweating man doing pushups, and moments of heroism, such as a firefighter carrying a boy outside a burning building. It also shows a Ram truck transporting literally an entire church, steeple intact through a downtown main street.

The Drum Major Institute, which was founded to preserve King’s legacy, said it “in no way condones the use of Dr. King’s sermon for this purpose.” They go onto say in a closing statement that, “In a twist of irony, one of the specific evils Dr. King condemned was the exploitation of the drum major instinct by advertisers, particularly car advertisers.” While I agree with the public in its uproar that Ram Trucks caused in using King’s sermon to sell cars, I wholeheartedly disagree in the way that those preserving King’s legacy chose to preserve only his words about

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capitalism. King’s sermon had much more to say about the way we live out our “drum major instincts” than just listening to car salesmen.

This sermon, delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where he was a pastor, referenced the same biblical passage that is our Gospel reading for today, Mark 10:35-45. “The greatest among you will be your servant.” In other words, if you want to lead, if you want to be great then you have to serve. According to Stanford University’s reprinting of his sermon, it was an adaptation of the 1952 homily “Drum-Major Instincts” by J. Wallace Hamilton, who was a well-known, white liberal Methodist preacher at the time. Both men tell the biblical story of James and John, who ask Jesus for the most prominent seats in heaven. At the core of their desire was a “drum major instinct—a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade.”¹ King begins his sermon saying,

“The setting is clear. James and John are making a specific request of the master. They had dreamed, as most of the Hebrews dreamed, of a coming king of Israel who would set Jerusalem free and establish his kingdom on Mount Zion, and in righteousness rule the world. And they thought of Jesus as this kind of king. And they were thinking of that day when Jesus would reign supreme as this new king of Israel. And they were saying, “Now when you establish your kingdom, let one of us sit on the right hand and the other on the left hand of your throne.”

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,

¹ (King, “The Drum Major,” 170–171)

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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. Alfred Adler, the great psychoanalyst, contends that this is the dominant impulse. That this quest for recognition, this desire for attention, this desire for distinction is the basic impulse, the basic drive of human life, this drum major instinct.

And you know, we begin early to ask life to put us first. Our first cry as a baby was a bid for attention. And all through childhood the drum major impulse or instinct is a major obsession. Children ask life to grant them first place. They are a little bundle of ego. And they have innately the drum major impulse or the drum major instinct.

Now in adult life, we still have it, and we really never get by it. We like to do something good. And you know, we like to be praised for it. Now if you don't believe that, you just go on living life, and you will discover very soon that you like to be praised. Everybody likes it, as a matter of fact. And somehow this warm glow we feel when we are praised or when our name is in print is something of the vitamin A to

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our ego. Nobody is unhappy when they are praised, even if they know they don't deserve it and even if they don't believe it. The only unhappy people about praise is when that praise is going too much toward somebody else. But everybody likes to be praised because of this real drum major instinct.

But Jesus knows the hearts of humanity. He sees right through us. He knows our drum major instincts. He knows James and John's drum major instincts. Because what is 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

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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.”

In a poignant re-telling of the Gospel, King concludes his sermon this way, He says, “I know a man—and I just want to talk about him a minute, and maybe you will discover who I'm talking about as I go down the way because he was a great one. And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old. Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the

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usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator. He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that his friends turned him over to them. One of his closest friends denied him. Another of his friends turned him over to his enemies. And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. When he was dead he was buried in a borrowed tomb, through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today he stands as the most influential figure that ever entered human history. All of the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one solitary life. His name may be a familiar one. But today I can hear them talking about him. Every now and then somebody says, "He's King of Kings." And again I can hear somebody saying, "He's Lord of Lords." Somewhere else I can hear somebody saying, "In Christ there is no East nor West." And then they go on and talk about, "In Him there's no North and South, but one great Fellowship of Love throughout the whole wide world." He didn't have anything. He just went around serving and doing good.

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This morning, you can be on his right hand and his left hand if you serve. It's the only way in.

King concluded his sermon by imagining his own funeral. Urging the congregation not to dwell on his life's achievements, including his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, King asked to be remembered as one who “tried to give his life serving others” (King, “The Drum Major,” 185). He implored his congregation to remember his attempts to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort prisoners. “Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice,” King intoned. “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” I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. I hope I can be an ounce of what Christ was like, is what King is saying, and I hope we all consider today.

Let us pray: