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## **A New Definition of Greatness**

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a new definition of greatness, and, in the largest sense, my text today is his life. Zooming in on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968 at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, though, I want to share with you what that great man had to say about greatness, and invite you to join me in a consideration of the choice to live a great life, and be great.

If you visit the homepage of The King Center website, you will hear Dr. King's voice thundering an excerpt from his sermon that morning, *The Drum Major Instinct*. He says, “If you want to be important – wonderful. If you want to be recognized – wonderful. If you want to be great – wonderful. But recognize that [the one] who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness.”

In other words, *to serve* is to be great.

Dr. King continues, “... 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.”

Dr. King concludes this sermon reflecting on his eulogy, foreshadowing the unspeakable events of exactly two months later. He says, “... say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace.... a drum major for righteousness.... I just want to leave a committed life behind.... I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.”

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The answer to each of these questions is the same:

Do you want to be great? Serve.

How about just good? Serve.

Do you want to feel that your life matters? Serve.

Do you want to be loved? Serve.

Do you want to feel happy? Serve.

It may feel a little counter-intuitive: To receive, serve. Especially when you feel you have nothing to give, serve. And above all, *serve all*; not just some, but all.

This is a new insight for me about Dr. King's work. I think of him as the iconic civil rights leader, but he was not only the Moses of Black America. When he said, *my people*, he meant *all* enslaved people, especially those enslaved by poverty. At the close of his life, he worked with the poorest of the country's poor, which led him to the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis. But he also worked with an extraordinary gathering of “non-Black” minority leaders. And he spoke, from his jail cell, with poor white people. Serve all.

Here's a view into each of these initiatives.

On March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1968, beginning in Memphis under a banner with a beautiful quote from Zechariah – *Not by might, not by power ... but by my spirit* – Dr. King headed west to Marks, Mississippi. “A small crowd waited in a flimsy board church with old funeral calendars for interior walls.

“‘Statistics reveal that you live in the poorest county in the United States,’ [Dr.] King told them. ‘Now this isn't right.’ ... On invitation, local residents came forward in a stream. One mother said her children ate pinto beans ‘morning, noon, and night.’ Another said hers stayed home from school because they had no clothes.” In an era when men didn't cry, Dr. King wept openly. Wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, he told the gathered, “I've listened to your problems, and it is ... it has touched me.” Leaving Marks, Dr. King resolved that what he called The Mule Train – the poor people's march to Washington to escalate the struggle for civil rights – would leave from that very place.<sup>1</sup> Serve all.

Astonishingly, just two days earlier, on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1968, Dr. King had “quietly tested strategies to overcome social barriers by nonviolence.... He closed to reporters his summit meeting with seventy-eight non-Black minority leaders....” Did you know about this gathering? I had never heard about it until this past week. “Mostly unknown to each

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968*, pp. 718-721

other [or to Dr. King] ... [the participants] ventured by invitation from across the United States to ... the heart of Black Atlanta. Wallace Mad Bear Anderson spoke for a poor Iroquois confederation of upstate New York. A deputy came from the bedside of César Chávez, who had barely survived a 25-day fast in penance for violent lapses by striking California farmworkers. Tillie Walker and Rose Crow Flies High represented plains tribes from North Dakota, while Dennis Banks led a delegation of Anishinabes... Assiniboin/Lakota leader Hank Adams, who [had spearheaded a drive for Northwestern salmon fishing rights, [was there].” Reies López Tijerina, “hailed as a [Chicana] Malcolm X, ... best known for [having led] an armed protest ... that ... occupied a courthouse [in New Mexico the year before<sup>2</sup>]” was there.

Repeatedly, Bernard Lafayette, cofounder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the aide who had put together this meeting, had asked Dr. King if he really wanted hardscrabble white groups to be represented. Each time, Dr. King answered with three words: *Are they poor?* Coal miners came, including Peggy Terry, who had been raised in a Kentucky Ku Klux Klan family. It had been the sight of Dr. King being released from jail in Montgomery, Alabama that had converted her to his cause; Peggy Terry “wowed movement crowds by asking where else a hillbilly housewife could trade ideas or jail cells with a Nobel Prize winner.”

Dr. King enjoined this impossibly, gloriously diverse gathering to commit to a “common willingness to sacrifice” in order to “put all their grievances on equal footing.” The summit closed with that agreement. “Myles Horton, who [had] helped recruit the white Appalachians, expressed euphoria after nearly four decades of cross-cultural isolation at his Highlander Center. ‘I believe,’ he said, ‘we caught a glimpse of the future.’”<sup>3</sup>

Serve all.

Returning to Dr. King's sermon, *The Drum Major Instinct* – the sermon that started this sermon about a new definition of greatness, which is not to be served, but to serve – in that sermon, we hear this wonderful story:

“I always try to do a little converting when I'm in jail,” Dr. King said. “And when we were in jail in Birmingham the other day, the white wardens and all enjoyed coming around the cell to talk about the race problem. And they were showing us where we were so wrong demonstrating. And they were showing us where segregation was so right. And they were showing us where intermarriage was so wrong. So I would get to preaching, and we would get to talking – calmly, because they wanted to talk about it.

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<sup>2</sup> 5 June, 1967

<sup>3</sup> Branch, *op cit*, pp. 715-717

And then we got down one day to the point – that was the second or third day – to talk about where they lived, and how much they were earning. And when those brothers told me what they were earning, I said, 'Now, you know what? You ought to be marching with us. You're just as poor as Negroes.' And I said, 'You are put in the position of supporting your oppressor, because through prejudice and blindness, you fail to see that the same forces that oppress Negroes in American society oppress poor white people. And all you are living on is the satisfaction of your skin being white, and ... thinking that you are somebody big because you are white. And you're so poor, you can't send your children to school. You ought to be out here marching with every one of us every time we have a march.'"

Serve all. Serve, even, your jailers. Serve, with no thought of return on your investment ... although you might just catch a glimpse of the equivalent of a Peggy Terry, a KKK-bred hillbilly housewife converted to the transforming power of nonviolent civil disobedience and the vision of the beloved community.

My spiritual companions, may we celebrate Dr. King's abiding legacy today and every day, as we commit and recommit to serve. With “a heart full of grace [and] a soul generated by love,” taking our part in the creation of the beloved community, may we seek to live a new definition of greatness: may we serve all.