

***“We All Have a ‘Greatest Moment’ Experience”***

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church  
for The First Sunday after Epiphany Sunday

January 14, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (also known as Baptism of Jesus)

**Scripture Readings:** Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Maybe you are not used to being asked: “What is the greatest moment in your life?” But let me ask you: “What **IS** the greatest moment in your life?”

Don’t be shy – I am convinced we all have one – or two or three. We often default to a disappointment that still haunts us, or a painful experience that leaves an impact on our memory and lives, but in the midst of all of that we also have a greatest moment experience. It may not be just below the surface of our consciousness, but even if buried we can lift it up to our conscious mind.

Now if I am so bold as to ask you to think of a greatest moment experience, it is probably only right and fair that I think of my own. So I did. I spent considerable time considering the options. I have had many momentous occasions in my life: I conducted funerals for many elite citizens and famous leaders, including Senators and Municipal politicians; twice I have had the premier attend a funeral I conducted; and twice the Lieutenant Governor came to a service of a prominent citizen and friend.

These were significant experiences, but they do not come close to the most significant event of my life. Hands down, the winner is October, 1982 as I sat in a pew at Forest United Church, holding my then three-month-old daughter awaiting her baptism.

Now for some, that may signify a pretty ordinary, non-descript human experience. But for me, as a minister, it was a unique pleasure. It is the only time I have sat holding my child in church. That never happens for a minister. Yes, both of my daughters may have received a quick hug when they came running up for a children’s story, and I think my older daughter once helped greet people at the door after church while in my arms, but sitting in a worship service with a child in arms never happens for a minister.

What made it even more significant is that my older daughter was baptized by me, since I lived 200 kilometres from the nearest minister. Bob Lepage, my “neighbour,” would have gladly come and done the baptism, I know, but it meant getting a replacement for his church (which would come from Sault Ste. Marie, over 200 km further away to the south) while also paying his mileage and honorarium from Wawa. It just seemed easier to have the session oversee the baptism, and I offered the words of blessing. A special opportunity, indeed, but not as special as holding one’s child and receiving the blessing of the church from two retired ministers who presided, as I experienced 4 years later.

So what is your “Greatest Moment” experience? I am sure you have thought of one or two by now. It helps to understand others’ greatest moment experiences, I think, if we are clear what our own are.

But the focus today is not on your or my greatest experiences, but on the baptism of Jesus. The event clearly was seen by the earliest church as the greatest moment of Jesus' life. No matter what else he faced, or where else he went, it was the greatest moment he experienced.

We hear a lot these days about the privileged and the downtrodden in the world. And in baptism, was Jesus seen as one specially blessed by God and so had an advantage that others never could have, or was Jesus a simple person from a very humble beginning who made the best of the opportunities placed before him? Probably to be fair it is a bit of both – the blessing was unique, and yet the opportunities placed before Jesus needed him to respond and live to the fullest what God had designed for his life.

This weekend Martin Luther King Jr. is being remembered across the United States. It took years of debate and discussion before his life and political witness earned a holiday in his honour. Most of us, I am sure, see King as a humble preacher with a powerful message and the ability to move crowds with his spiritual, social, political, and cultural insights. Yet I realized this week as I read stories of his upbringing and journey that in many ways he was a privileged person.

Now, don't get me wrong. He was the son of a preacher – Martin Luther King, Sr., so had humble and frugal beginnings. Yet the very fact he grew up in a southern Baptist church he had the advantage that when we went into the ministry, it was part of a family focus. Eventually he returned to Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta to work with his father, for the tradition often was a child (then, a son) would follow the father in the pulpit. His destiny was established, and his opportunities many.

But in saying that, one cannot dismiss the incredible gifts and insights that Martin Luther King, Jr. brought to his ministry and to his life. He was given a platform from which to teach and preach – he lived up to the needs of the people through his spiritual and human gifts.

What was King's greatest moment in life? It is not for me to say, any more than it is my role to tell you what your greatest moment is. But I can say that the world was blessed by King when he took the opportunity to follow through on the fallout from Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery Bus on December 1, 1955. Four days later the Montgomery Improvement Association was born, and bus boycotts were organized. The head of that movement was unanimously elected – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Recently a successful doctoral candidate from Boston University, King could have taken the easy route and said I am more interested in the academic world than the political and social world, but ministry for him embraced it all.

So it was with Jesus. His blessing was an invitation to interact with people and help them in the midst of the needs they faced. We will hear many stories of the ways he did just that in the weeks ahead.

King shared his insights on why he did what he did in these words: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he

stands at times of challenges and controversy. The true neighbour will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others.”

Now King’s insights also were tempered by a pacifism that continued to his death by assassination. Like Jesus who inspired him, King believed that the ways that we live must be consistent with the truths that we believe.

“...the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have toiled to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends.”

As people criticized some of King’s followers for their simple faith and lack of education, he lifted up one woman, aged 72, who had worked hard all of her life, who said during the bus strikes as she was among thousands of others who walked to work or walked to do shopping rather than take the bus, that she displayed “ungrammatical profundity:” “My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.”

King, in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize of 1964 in Oslo remarked, in part: “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.”

The goals upheld by Martin Luther King, Jr. were not unique to him. They embodied and made current the vision that Jesus had in his ministry, begun by an act of baptism and being called into a new way of being.

Whatever your Greatest Moment in life, may it be a source of new vision and new purpose for you, and help you to understand anew the call of Christ upon your life in this time, and on this day. AMEN