



[King's Speech at SMU on March 17, 1966](#)

I learned something after the first service. There is no service, but your service, but there is another service. After it, someone told me that it was Burt Moore, a member of this church when he was a student at Southern Methodist University who sent a letter to Dr. King asking him to come address the student body and who also picked him up at the airport and got him where he was going. So I wanted to mention that. Is Lynn here?

Lynn Kirk, who is still a member of the church, was her husband, Burt, who passed in a few years ago. So at the end of that speech or during that speech, one of the things that he says, Dr. King, is that love is understanding, creative, goodwill for all men. When you stand up against the evil system and yet understand the perpetrator, understand the perpetrator of that evil system.

I'm not at understanding yet. Just giving you that as I start. I don't know if I'm at love yet. I like to think I am. I don't know much for certain these days. I don't know about you, but that's just how I'm feeling. This reading is an excerpt as we heard from that speech. And the section we read today is the discussion of the ways that the Greek language, which is the language of many of the Christian scriptures that Dr. King studied well and that we have today, the way that they talk about love. And it should be clear to you as it's now clear to me that among the many things Dr. King was to the world, one of those things was a total nerd.

Do not fight me on this, church. He quotes Shakespeare in this speech and talks about wooing Coretta with it. Nerd. Talks about Greek, the meanings and the uses for it and philosophical thought

and Plato, where today he would be forbidden from teaching Plato at Texas A&M, doing a little name check there. Although as we established, he's only forbidden from teaching from symposium, but I think the Phaedrus is still fair game. This is nerd recognizing nerd here. The wings of desire, anyone, the Phaedrus? Okay. Anyway, more on that later. So why do you guys let me up here?

You're very kind. Thank you. We think of the event that brought Dr. King into national consciousness, the boycott, the bus boycott that started when Rosa Parks would not move one seat back from where she was. And we focus on Dr. King's leading of nonviolent direct action, and those things taught him a lot. They taught him what it felt like to get hated in this country. Indeed, Time Magazine called him the most hated man in America. Hated by white supremacists, people who believed that their birthright was to control this nation, its resources, and the people in it by the imagined virtue of their birth. And through the actions that Dr. King and his community led, he disclosed, he unveiled this hatred to the world. Every one of those actions was born not only of instinct, not only of talent, but from deep analysis of history, strategic planning to accomplish his desired result.

Even if the perpetrators of hate were too dim to know it, what people who hated Dr. King hated about him most was that he was smarter than they were. It's right. And plenty of people in Dallas hated and feared Dr. King too. Cannot forget this. White and Black leaders in Dallas for different reasons had experienced the tremendous violence of this city already through the '40s and the '50s, not to mention Fort Worth, who were afraid that Dr. King's presence would stoke the flame of racial violence already present here into a fire though that would engulf the entire city. One story Reverend Peter Johnson told right here last year in a program by your racial equity task force goes that Dr. King arrived once at the airport and was met by Black preachers of the city and invited to go back on his airplane and to leave town.

That was the early '50s. But even in this city, we can see the truth about the fear that those leaders had. We live in a city that was afraid not so much of Dr. King, but what he agitated in the worst elements among us that agitates so many right now that we are seeing, agitates hate and violence. In 1963, Dr. King was convinced by Burt to come to Dallas and speak... Oh, sorry, '66. In '63, he was convinced by another group to come and speak at Fair Park, the Fair Park Auditorium. Now, even Black leaders in Dallas, including Juanita Kraft, who was a friend of Rosa Parks, they were friends and a tremendous leader in this city, even Juanita Kraft was not 100% on board in '63 with having King in the city, because the fear of the violence he might trigger was very real.

One article about his speech here talked about one protestor outside of the speech proclaiming that Hitler was not radical enough, that Hitler was too moderate, and there were bomb threats being called into Fair Park to prevent him from speaking. These are the kinds of tactics being used then, not unfamiliar to what we are seeing now. He came anyway and spoke. Though I can't find a transcript, if anyone has one, I'd love to see it. Please send it to me. We do have some quotes from the speech that were taken in real time by reporters as he delivered it. One thing that he says was this, "Live up to the best that is within you. Live each day as if it were your last day on earth. Rise above the trite experiences of life and elevate your life into a sphere of radiant and peaceful union with your inner self and your personal relationships. May this year be your best year yet." Right.

And these are beautiful sentiments and strong ones appealing keenly to religious and non-religious attendees alike and very much, very much like many of the quotes we see from Dr. King today in social media, commercials. But then Dr. King said something else that many in the audience in Texas believed was going a bit too far. A lot of pearls being clutched in the moment. I dare say some here still might think what he said then is going too far, but he said, I quote, "If a man has not found something worth dying for, he isn't fit to live."

You hear that, right? That's also Dr. King, friends. The saint among men, yes, who through peaceful physical action demonstrated his resolve over and over to bring an end to segregation or to try and is a good and well-meaning image of Dr. King to project and to remember. That's right. But that truly friends, and I believe this in my heart of hearts, was but an outward expression of an inward truth, a real truth that he felt. He knew through the study of history alongside the study of scripture that any life of real meaning has real costs. To challenge the supremacy of one perceived race over another perceived race, knowing fully that race is an entirely constructed idea costs you. To counter a culture that prizes wealth to the extent that the poor are marginalized, made to suffer needlessly great costs, and to call for an end to militarism in our nation and abroad. Deadly costs, I dare say.

Supremacy, inequality, and military might, the three pillars of his calls to action, are sensitive things to challenge here in the United States and sensitive things for him to challenge in 1963 in Dallas and maybe still today in Dallas. Underneath the outward demonstrations that eventually sparked changes in our world and in this city was a sublime and gifted intellect, no doubt married though with inability to teach and connect to people through love, all resting though on this hard truth. It was his truth that the God of his understanding loved the world so much that this love overflows its boundaries and spills out into the world, into the form of love he called agape, which literally means love feast, a feast of love, communion. Get it? At the table. It is the love that says life is a bounty for all to take. So no one need ever go hungry of the divine blessing of connection, of community for him through the sacrifice made by Jesus that rings still in the sanctuaries of this world near and far or it should.

It's hard to love some in the world right now. I know. It's hard to see the hate on the face of a federal agent gunning an innocent woman down in the street and wonder, is there a just God, a God of love? It's hard to see agents filling the streets of a city targeted and provoked into action through violence and intimidation of neighbors, of their beloveds, of their family. And those of you, I know, I know how this feels who lived through those times or who have studied them well. In the times of Dr. King, I can't imagine how it feels, how triggering, how awful to see those images again on American streets again.

A few months after delivering the speech at SMU, Dr. King, as Beth mentioned in our story, had another engagement. To speak at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly and deliver the Ware Lecture, one of the highest honors our denomination can bestow. And in that speech, Dr. King took the time to expound further on the power of agape. And his explanation, he said this, "When one rises to love on this level, he loves a person who does the evil deed while hating the deed." I believe that in our best moments in this struggle, we've tried to adhere to this. In some strange way, we have been able to stand up in the face of our most violent opponents and say, in substance, we will match your

capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with our soul force.

Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot, in all good conscience, obey your unjust laws because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.

Right. Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Threaten our children, bomb our homes, send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours. Sounds a lot like today. And drag us out on some wayside road, beat us and leave us half dead. And as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the nation and make it appear we are not fit morally, culturally or otherwise for integration. And we will still love you, but be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process and our victory will be a double victory.

This is our message of the nonviolent movement when we are true to it. Yeah. And in this speech, he said it again to a room of Unitarian Universalists. "If a man has not found something worth dying for, he isn't fit to live." Let's all breathe.

With the tools of intellect, enormous love, and unstoppable effective action, he created in others something they truly dread. He created that thing people hide from at all costs. He created something keeping all our therapists employed and barrooms full. He created tension. He created longstanding tension in relationships. In his letter addressed to white moderates penned in the Birmingham jail, he says, "I'm not afraid of the word tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. We who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of the tension we merely bring to the surface, the hidden tension that is already alive.

Religion, as it was said by Forrest Church, is the human response to the dual realities of being alive and having to die. That is the tension knit into our bodies, into our minds from the time we break forth to breathe into this world. It is the tension that winds the clocksprings of our lives that sets us into motion even if we don't know that's what's doing it. We are creatures of tension. We are creations of that tension that is each of our inheritances as humans whose breaths are numbered from birth. It is the tension that lets a great leader challenge us all from down the street and from the dais of this faith's annual meeting, all the way right here, right now with the proposition that I paraphrase now, if you haven't found something worth dying for, you aren't truly living. And I tell you, I tell you true.

Preachers all over this country right now in this moment, perhaps for the first time in their careers, are asking their congregations and the beautiful people in them, "Have you found something truly worth living for or harder, worth dying for?" It's too often confused, this idea though with the question of a coward who asks only what's worth killing for and forgets what is worth dying for because it's the tension underneath every life. It's the question every true patriot asks, which is why when a call went out this week for clergy around the country to be present in Minneapolis in solidarity with those being

attacked in the streets, dragged from their homes, dragged from their cars and shot in cold blood, your church, this church answered, "Our friends asked for help. We're going to get their backs." I leave in a few days to be in Minneapolis with the folks there.

Hundreds of clergy from around the country are descending, are arriving to show that people of faith are people of love still, braver than bullies and more ferocious than any feckless thug, parading around the streets that they swore to fricking protect and that love is still stronger than hate. Down the street, right here, Dr. King began the poem to woo his love, Coretta. Yes, with love is not love, which alters when it alteration finds. It bends with the remover to remove, oh no, it is an ever fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken. That's where love begins, but it also has the last word. Sonnet 1:16 ends like this, "Love's not times fool. The rosy lips and cheeks within his bending sickles compass come. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error and upon me proved I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

It's at the edge of doom where love lies. It's at the edge of doom where purpose grows. It's here at the edge of doom, where lives a faith held by a community of understanding that begs courage of us, courage to believe what great value your life is that is given in the name of others that is blessed by the sacred tension underlying all we do, all we can ever be, all we'll ever love. The last words Dr. King spoke were to Ben Branch, the musician, planning to play that evening at the rally for sanitation workers in Memphis as they were leaving the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was slain. The last words he said were, "Ben, make sure you play Take My Hand, Precious Lord in the meeting tonight, play it real pretty."

The final verse of this song, Standing at the River, it's asking us how we'll feel when we face our final hours and cross over into what lay there for each of us, what may find a home. And so in the name of all that's holy, friends, I pray we know we did all we could for justice in this life. In the name of mercy, I pray we know that we eased suffering in this life. And in a name of love, I pray we each find what is worthy of our love and what is worthy of our sacred lives.