

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

10.7.12 Sermon: “Beloved Community”

Presenter: Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Singing together invites the experience of the Beloved Community. For many, the deepest, most profound experience of Beloved Community of the twentieth-century happened during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1950's and '60s. They were touched by the powerful transforming sense of community that came to life working for racial justice.

Rosemarie Freeney Harding, who worked closely with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activists in the 1960's, pointed out, "Another vital source of support [for civil rights work] was music, particularly the sacred music of the black experience, which has long been an alchemical resource for struggle: a conjured strength. ... The songs changed the atmosphere, becoming an almost palpable barrier between the demonstrators and police, giving the marchers an internal girding that allowed them to move without fear." *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* by Grace Lee Boggs & Scott Kurashige

Many of us however, were not involved in the civil rights movement during the 1960's, or even alive. Many of us have had powerful experiences of community but don't know if those experiences are similar to or different from that term Beloved Community. The gray hymnal references a number of songs under that category. I know I've certainly heard many a UU minister wax rhapsodical about Beloved Community, particularly those 15 to 20 years older than me, who were on the streets during the 1960's when I was in elementary school. I hear UU ministers 15-20 years younger than me talking about Beloved Community too, but with a different emphasis. Whatever beloved community is, there are powerful experiences of community that can happen here we'd like to cultivate.

Most people who refer to this term point back to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King frequently spoke about Beloved Community. The Rev. Dr. Thomas Mikelson, former minister in Cambridge, Massachusetts and interim minister in Saratoga Springs right now, did his doctoral thesis on King's understanding of Beloved Community. [He wrote:](#)

[King] uses the phrase often and offers brief thumbnail sketches, but there is no real explanation. There is not so much as a whole chapter in a book or one complete article on the theme of beloved community. We have to piece together comments from here and there, and even then we get, at best, a hazy picture...I am not saying that King did not understand what he meant by beloved community, only that he did not leave us with a clearly developed explanation of the concept that was so central in his rhetoric.

Most scholars point back to the first person who used that phrase, Harvard philosopher

Josiah Royce at the beginning of the twentieth century. He sought to translate the Christian understanding of agape, or unconditional love, into a philosophical model he called beloved community.

Central to what we know about Jesus is the concept of the Kingdom or Realm of God, what Jesus was both anticipating and striving to create on earth. Rather than building a vision of community on individual scriptural references, Royce was looking for a deeper understanding that was consistent with those references yet transcended them. [He thought:](#)

The central doctrine of the Master was: "So act so that the Kingdom of Heaven may come." This means: So act as to help, however you can, and whenever you can, towards making mankind one loving brotherhood, whose love is not a mere affection for morally detached individuals, but a love of the unity of its own life upon its own divine level ... raised to communion with this spiritual community itself.

For Royce and King, the Beloved Community was thoroughly grounded in Jesus' vision of the Realm of God. For Unitarian Universalists however, we extend it beyond Jesus. In Genesis 18, Abraham, offering hospitality to three men as he sat outside his tent in the heat of the day, created beloved community. We would extend it beyond Judaism too, to a more inclusive, universal vision of religious community. Abraham, Jesus, and Mohammed may have masterfully recognized it and practiced it during their lives, but it does not originate with them. Beloved community describes a moving, transforming, empowering, and inspiring way for people to be together that changes hearts, minds and lives. And as they feel that happening inside and witness it happening to others, they know intuitively they are experiencing beloved community.

At this year's General Assembly, singing songs while protesting outside the Tent City Jail in Arizona, many felt that experience of beloved community happening for us. As I've been speaking from this pulpit for the last few weeks, crossing borders invites the experience of beloved community; encountering prophets invites the experience of beloved community. There is a oneness we feel when beloved community comes to life.

So if personal experience is a way one recognizes beloved community coming to life, the next question most people ask is how can we create it? While King didn't leave behind an instruction manual, there is great guidance in his legacy. Dr. Mikelson writes of King's vision:

Beloved community was ... first and foremost spiritual. It meant a society rooted in the highest form of love, a love that considers the needs and welfare of others. It meant a world in which differences were settled lovingly and nonviolently, a world in which we see, even in our opponent, a child of God. [\(same article linked above\)](#)

We may not have an instruction manual from King, but many people are working on this project. The latest paradigm for creating it I've come across was presented at a workshop at GA this year. The presenters spoke of the integration of social service and social action with spiritual practice, as a support for the development of beloved community. The integration of inner and outer work in the context of small groups is the latest vision of how to energize sustainable social change work.

Unfortunately, conflicting visions, language and strategies for action work against that integration. So many things can go wrong in the process of community organizing. Those collisions set up emotional roadblocks to beloved community. Unitarian Universalists often encounter them in interfaith work around theistic language and theological concepts many of us reject. The educated and experienced frequently become impatient with those less experienced or more rigid in their visions and strategies. And then there is the amount of time organizing demands. I remember that struggle well when I was involved in leading ARISE. Stepping into social change work often feels like stepping into quicksand that threatens to become all consuming. The integration of spiritual practices as part of social service and social action feeds the inspiration that can supply the energy for the work.

As I mentioned earlier, to my mind, Occupy Albany was an instructive example of new ways to create beloved community. Using consensus, the participants practiced a radical respect for every voice in the community, resisting the urge to separate "us" and "them." Using innovative group process techniques, the facilitators skillfully assisted a collective intelligence to manifest in the group that helped them move forward find agreement. Those of you were part of those early days in Academy Park will recall the beautiful spirit there as the occupation began. A strong sense of common purpose and mutual support permeated the peaceful gathering.

The new paradigm of beloved community witnessed in the Occupy movement made relationships primary. At the open meetings all voices were heard and respected. The well-being of the people came first rather than subordinating it to goals, tasks and strategies. People inside and outside the community were not sorted into hierarchies of victims, allies and oppressors. The actions and solutions proposed sought the good of all, resisting us and them dualism, resisting categorical thinking.

This kind of holistic organizing is critical to the new paradigm of creating beloved community. In this new paradigm, we can no longer separate problems and solutions. Think of food and energy. We are both the problem and the solution. Our eating patterns and energy use drive the problems. We can point a finger at factory farming, big oil and gas ... but how many fingers point back to our behavior? The markets will change if the people of

the world, especially Americans, change their habits and preferences. The changes needed are both external and internal.

The secret to creating and sustaining the experience of beloved community is finding the balance between the inner and the outer. Only doing inner work neglects the problems of the world that need our attention and energy. Doing only outer work runs the risk of human energy depletion, polarization, and misdirection.

When I've been successful in striking the balance between the inner and the outer, I've discovered new sources of energy. When I find that balance, I'm more able to face and move past my fears. I'm more able to channel my anger into creative action. I'm more able to cross borders and connect in love.

Grace Lee Boggs, 96 year-old Chinese-American activist and scholar of social change movements, says it well in these words:

...we are beginning to understand that the world is always being made and never finished, that activism can be the journey rather than the arrival, that struggle doesn't always have to be confrontational but can take the form of reaching out to find common ground with many "others" in our society who are also seeking ways out from alienation, isolation, privatization, and dehumanization...*The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* by Grace Lee Boggs & Scott Kurashige

When we reach out to each other and stand together on the ground of our common humanity, beloved community comes to life. The power released can set the direction for our lives and our action in the world; a direction, that moves relentlessly toward freedom.

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