

“Beloved Community”

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I remember one time when I was a little girl in Lutheran Sunday School in the Midwest, coloring a picture of Jesus standing in the middle of a group of animals, cows and horses, lambs and goats, zebras and lions. Pretty much like Jesus in a zoo, only the animals were free and everybody was content and happy!

This image of the peaceable kingdom is taken from the book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible: The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

I have since learned that this serene and beautiful Biblical passages is one used to study the theological topic of eschatology, the study of the end times. This complex and multilayered topic is, briefly, the idea that there will be a future time, with the coming or the second coming of a Messiah, when the world will be at peace and there will be plenty, no war and no hunger, no suffering. A beautiful image. For some, this provides an image of heaven, a better life somewhere, someday. That image of heaven elsewhere can be a balm for those suffering in this world at this time. It can also be an excuse, a justification for oppression: it will be better in the next life, in heaven, someday. Just wait.

In liberal religious traditions like Unitarian Universalism, we tend not to focus on eschatology so much. Now, in this election year I want to be very clear that I am talking about liberal religion, not liberal politics. They are very different things, and I'm pretty sure that will be the topic of a sermon sometime this spring. For today, I want to talk a moment about the characteristics of religious liberalism.

Unitarian Minister and theologian James Luther Adams identified five characteristics of liberal religions that he labeled “the five smooth stones.” The image of the stones comes from the Biblical story of David and Goliath; when he went to face his enemy, David took only his sling and five smooth stones. (1 Samuel 17).

One of the five smooth stones of religious liberalism speaks directly to our tendency to turn away from notions of end times. Adams said this:

"Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community. It is **this** which makes the role of the prophet central and indispensable in liberalism."

The smooth stone Adams speaks of here is Justice.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are committed to creating heaven here on Earth, now. Not some distant place at some distant time. Justice. Here. Now.

This weekend, we honor the life and teaching of one of those central and indispensable prophets, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King helped define a liberal Christian tradition that called for the peace that comes from justice in this world. Instead of preaching about the peaceable kingdom that would come someday, he preached about justice, here, now and he called that beloved community.

The term "beloved community" was popularized by Dr. King, but was created by theologian Josiah Royce who helped found the American branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1915 to oppose the United States entry into war that had broken out in Europe, which would become World War I.

The Fellowship of Reconciliation claims to be the largest and oldest interfaith peace and justice organization in the US, today focusing on peace and demilitarization, especially in the Middle East. Its tenants include the use of nonviolence to resolve conflict and the right of conscience. Dr. King was a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and brought these teachings into his civil rights work.

For Dr. King, beloved community was not an unattainable ideal, but a realistic and achievable goal that would come to fruition when a critical mass of people were committed to, trained in, and using nonviolence as a way of life. The King Center says this:

Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human

decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of [unity]. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

Dr. King not only painted a vision of what could be, but offered the tools to get there: principles of nonviolence and steps for non-violent social change. The principles are things like: nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people, chooses love instead of hate, and seeks to defeat injustice not people. Tools for social change include education, direct action and reconciliation.

It's important to note that Dr. King didn't deny the presence of conflict, in fact he named it as a real part of human existence. Rather, he called us to resolve conflict using non-violent means. This reminds me of the part in the covenant of this congregation that reads:

Because we recognize that conflict is normal, we promise to ...speak with each other directly and honestly from a position of respect, kindness and love, recognizing that to do so, there will be times we need to seek counsel from the community.

By our covenant, we also have aspirations for creating beloved community.

So, why is beloved community aspirational and not yet real? Dr. King described three forms of violence that are barriers to beloved community, what he called “the triple evils.” They are poverty, racism and militarism.

According to the King Center, poverty is characterized by unemployment, homelessness, slums, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, and infant mortality. To this list of ills, I would add income inequality, lack of universal health care, punitive bankruptcy laws, and lack of commitment to a living wage. What makes poverty a violence is not only the impact on people, for that is violent indeed, but the fact that there is enough. There is enough for everyone to have what is needed for life. That we do not choose to create and support systems that ensure the equitable distribution of enough to everyone is a violence to all people and the bonds that connect us.

The second evil of racism shows up as prejudice, apartheid, ethnic conflict, anti-Semitism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, ageism, discrimination against people with disabilities, and stereotypes. To this list I would add anti-Muslim sentiment, an “us and

them” mentality, and exclusion of all kinds.

Dr. King said that racism is a philosophy based on contempt for life. Contempt for life. It is a philosophy that places one group above all others, naming the other as less than, bad, unworthy, even evil. And, this leads to violence against bodies, mind and spirits. All of the “isms” deny the reality of humanity. And they are threats to life because they deny that we are interdependent, Dr. King's inescapable network of mutuality. None of us is free until all of us are free.

Our chalice lighting this morning mentioned “melting away the tethers that uphold whiteness.” So what does “whiteness” mean? It is the philosophy of racism; the idea that white skin and white culture is best. That white skin and culture is normal, is the ideal, is supreme. White supremacy. Racism.

One of the principles of nonviolence is that it seeks to defeat injustice, not people. Calling out whiteness doesn't make white people villains. It names the racism that has been built into systems that discriminate against anyone who is not “white” in skin, behavior and culture. Our systems are racist; they were made that way to concentrate and preserve power in the hands of a few. That is the injustice we are called to defeat.

The third and final evil that prevents beloved community is militarism. This is experienced as war, imperialism, domestic violence, rape, terrorism, human trafficking, media violence, drugs, child abuse, and violent crime. To that list of ills, I would add all forms of sexual violence, as well as detention centers and refugee camps. Militarism is simply handling differences in a violent way with a goal of conquest, rather than handling differences using methods of peaceful conflict resolution with the goal of reconciliation.

In exploring the spiritual theme of integrity, as we are doing this month, our focus tends to go to the personal; how does a person have integrity, live with integrity? How do we stay whole? Dr. King's beloved community offers us a way to expand integrity to something much bigger. Beloved community is integrity, wholeness at the community level. Us means all of us. We don't leave some part of “us” behind. We rejoice in the many ways that we are alike, and we work with honesty and commitment to resolve the ways in which we are different and in conflict.

So right about now we all might be feeling a bit overwhelmed. Those are really long lists of evil. They are real and exist in this world, the world where we want to create beloved community. The aspiration may seem really out of reach right now.

I can understand why the image of the peaceable kingdom is so attractive, not only

because it is a lovely image, but because it seems easier. We wait for the Messiah, someone else will come and save us, creating heaven somewhere else. We don't have to do anything, learn anything, or change anything.

In the on-going work of our liberal religious community, it's up to us. We take action, we learn things, we make change in our minds and in our hearts and in the world. We create heaven on Earth, justice, here, now. As our chalice lighting this morning said, may the flame ignite in us radical love that transforms our energy into purposeful action.

Tomorrow will mark the 25th anniversary of the day of service that celebrates The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life and legacy. Martin Luther King Day is the only federal holiday designated as a national day of service to encourage all Americans to volunteer to improve our communities. It is a day “on” rather than a day “off.” If you are wondering how to spend this day “on,” I can offer a few suggestions.

First, there are people and groups working to defeat each of the evils that I named earlier. Whether it's Books, Brownies and Beans to help fund homeless programs, or visiting asylum seekers in detention centers, or working to stop human trafficking, or helping build relationships between Muslims and Jews in the US and the Middle East. There are a million ways that we can make a difference. Pick one.

A colleague once gave me a lifeline when I was feeling especially discouraged and overwhelmed by the state of the world and the state of humanity. She reminded me of our interdependent web and that we are all connected. “So, just pick strand in the web and pull it toward justice,” she said, “it pulls everything else toward justice, too. When you work for immigrant justice, it impacts environmental justice. When you work for LGBTQ rights it impacts women's rights. When you work to combat climate chaos, it impacts everything because it is all connected. So, just pick something to work on, it doesn't matter what, just pick something and pull it toward justice.” We can help bend the arc of the universe.

Second, if you are not familiar with the principles of nonviolence, I invite you to explore them at The King Center website and elsewhere. They contain an invitation to integrity, both personal and community. They offer food for reflection; you may not agree with or adopt all of them, and they are worth considering. Most importantly, they offer a context for hope.

Third, I invite you to educate yourself about the 8th Principle Project if you are not already familiar with it. Unitarian Universalists have 7 principles that inform our theology and guide our behavior. In May 2017, two women, one African American and

one white, proposed to the UUA an 8th principle that explicitly names Beloved Community as one of our goals. The principle is under study this year and will be discussed at the 2020 General Assembly, our annual gathering in June. The proposed principle currently reads:

“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

The consideration of this proposed principle is fundamentally a conversation about the heart of our faith tradition and how we are called to be in the world. Is Beloved Community our goal? If it is, what does that mean for our beliefs and actions? What may we need to let go of? What may need to be different? These are important questions for our faith community, nationally and here in Olympia.

As you heard in our story, our Unitarian history is intertwined with racism. William Ellery Channing, the most famous Unitarian preacher and theologian of the early to mid-1800's, was conflicted about speaking out against slavery. He knew it was immoral, and he was faced with a moral dilemma, forced to consider his integrity and the integrity of his community. The words of a spiritually grounded woman who was committed to justice helped open the mind and heart of a famous minister. I find hope in his transformation because it reminds me that it is always possible.

We are an association of congregations that covenant together, just like we covenant to be together in this congregation. How we choose to do that is important. How we keep our covenant and come back to it when we break it, because we will, is also important. I invite you to be part of these important conversations.

To close, I invite you to join me in a brief recognition of our connection in community. I experienced this at our General Assembly a few years ago in Columbus, Ohio. As you are comfortable, please make a physical connection with someone near you. If you are comfortable, take the hand of your neighbor and repeat after me:

I put my hand in yours

so that we may do together

what I cannot do alone. (repeat)

Let us hold each other as we hold a moment of silence together.

Additional resources:

More about the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) [here](#).

More on James Luther Adams and the 5 smooth stones [here](#).

[The King Center](#).

The UUA [7 principles](#)

More about the [8th Principle Project](#).