

“Building Beloved Community”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, February 7, 2021

Reading: An excerpt from “To All Get Free Together” by UU community organizer and activist Chris Crass:

To become an anti-racist faith community, the key question for a white/white majority community is not “How do we get people of color to join our faith community?” It is, instead, “How can we make a prolonged, spiritually-rooted, engaged commitment to uprooting white supremacy within our community and take ongoing collective action to challenge it in society?”

Our goal is not to have white people sit alongside a person of color so as to affirm that those white people aren’t racist. Our goal is to build and be part of beloved community, united to end structural oppression and unleash collective liberation in our faith communities, schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, and throughout society. Our goal is to join hands across the divisions of racism in our faith and in our communities, and affirm the humanity in each other.

Our goal is for our faith communities to be spiritually alive, learning from and contributing to liberation cultures and legacies. For our faith communities to be welcoming homes for people of all colors, sexualities, classes, ages, abilities, genders and citizenship statuses. For our faith communities to regularly invite us into and prepare us for courageous action for collective liberation, held in loving community for the long haul.

May our faith communities be active agents in the world, to help us all get free together.

Sermon/Homily: “Building Beloved Community”

A few years ago, I learned a journaling practice from my mom, who is a regular writer

like I am. The practice is to choose a word for the year and then notice how that word shows up in your life and writing. This year my word is “curiosity,” specifically curiosity as the antidote to judgement. One month into the year, it has shown up in fascinating ways so far! You may even recall that I shared this word with you in last Sunday’s sermon.

Last year my word was “love.” Love became my word for 2020 when I noticed a question go through my head as I was writing a prayer one Saturday morning in late 2019. As I wrote about the ever-abiding love that holds us all, I wondered, “Do I really believe that? Do I believe in that love?” And so, last year, with the pandemic and an explosion of hate crimes and racial violence and a contested election, my word was love. No one promised that spiritual practice was easy.

My experience of the word “love” last year came to mind as I reflected on our spiritual theme for this month, “beloved community.” We tend to associate the term “beloved community” with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. but it was created by theologian Josiah Royce. Royce helped found the American branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1915 to oppose the United States’ entry into a war that had broken out in Europe, which would become World War I.

The Fellowship of Reconciliation exists today as an interfaith organization 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 the ultimate goal of his activism and advocacy. As he spoke to his supporters at the end of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, he said, “Our ultimate end must be reconciliation; the end must be redemption; the end must be the creation of the beloved community. We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization... understanding goodwill for all... It begins by loving others for their sakes and makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both. It is this type of spirit and this type of love

that can transform opposers into friends.”

Dr. King’s prophetic words and actions were revolutionary in so many ways, including in his use of non-violent resistance. He knew that violence would not build the movement he wanted and would not be in alignment with the values he preached. He was so clear that the movement for justice was grounded in love; there is no beloved community without love.

What is also revolutionary about Dr. King’s words is that he asserts that love works both ways; while he hated segregation, he worked to love the segregationists. He was clear that behavior that violated anyone’s humanity was a barrier to beloved community. As he loved others, he expected the same from them in return. He didn’t call it love, but it’s implied in his call for equality and respect. I notice that we tend to focus on Dr. King’s generosity in offering love to his enemies, while minimizing his call for love in return, his demand to be seen and respected in his humanity.

In our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition, we call this mutual love “covenant,” the agreements we make with and to each other about how we will be together. OUUC has a covenant, I’ll share a link to it in the chat a bit later. The thing about covenants is that they are based in relationship and they work both ways. Covenants support building beloved community because they recognize that differences and conflict are normal, and covenant calls us to work toward reconciliation and redemption. Covenants ask us to remain in relationship even when it’s hard. Covenants inform how we will **be** together as we **do** together. And, they are grounded in mutual love.

Catholic teacher and pastor Henri Nouwen wrote this:

“Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives...That person is always in your community somewhere; in the eyes of others, you might be that person.”

Nouwen reminds us that building beloved community not only requires that we believe that others are worthy of our love, but that we will be worthy of love and respect in the eyes of others, even those who experience us as hard. A foundation of beloved community is trust—not only letting others learn that we will love them, but trust that we will be loved when we let others down. Trust grounded in relationship and love.

Recently I experienced a poignant reminder of the importance of relationship and trust in building beloved community. I won't go into all the details for many reasons. Suffice it to say that, in a situation of oppression and potential conflict, I did not act in a way consistent with my aspirations and values, and I caused harm to someone. After the initial event, my attempts to reconnect and offer support caused even more hurt. Yep, ministers do that, too. There were many causes underneath my mistake, some of which I knew at the time and some I discovered in the days that followed. It was what followed that so profoundly reminded me of the relationships and trust needed to build beloved community.

Here are some things I learned: The person I hurt and I were able to have a difficult conversation because we had a relationship of mutual respect and were building trust. Building beloved community means having hard conversations, facing our own challenges and limitations, humility and apology. It means staying in relationship especially when it is hard. And, it took a while, the processing and learning and the conversations. Building beloved community takes time.

Also, it took more than the two of us. As this person and I spoke, I realized that we both had called on others in our networks for support; each of asked others to help us sort out and work through what had happened so we could come together for reconciliation and redemption. It took a whole community beyond us to help us reconnect and repair our relationship.

It was hard to realize that, for someone I cared about, for a while at least, I was “that person.” It was a week of humility, gratitude, grace and learning. It was also a week of

love, loving and being loved. (There was a fair amount of curiosity at work in there as well!)

There are many barriers to building beloved community. Dr. King named three kinds of violence as the primary reasons we have not achieved beloved community: poverty, racism, and militarism. I would name the characteristics of white supremacy culture, which includes Dr. King's three reasons as well as things like ego and individualism, expectations of perfection, competition and perceptions of scarcity, and fear of conflict. (Later I'll share a link where you can find more info about white supremacy culture.)

In this month of reflection on beloved community, we also recognize Black History month. This month we recognize the wholeness of our country's relationship with race, especially people of African descent. We honor the contributions of black people of the past like Ida B. Wells, W.E.B DuBois, Harriett Tubman, and Dr. King. We also honor people of the present like Alicia Garza & Patrice Cullors, co-founders of Black Lives Matter, Rev. William Barber of the Poor People's Campaign, and civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson. And, deep gratitude to Stacy Abrams and the black women of Georgia who organized a peaceful revolution. In order to build the beloved community, we must also acknowledge the centuries of slavery, more than a century of Jim Crow, decades of separate but equal, the new Jim Crow, and the continued existence of discriminatory laws. Today we have persistent gaps between African Americans and others in economic opportunity, access to housing, voting rights, dealings with law enforcement, health outcomes and life expectancy.

As painful as it is, we must face all that has been and all that is in order to build beloved community.

Activist Grace Lee Boggs said, "Building community is to the collective / as spiritual practice is to the individual." (repeat)

The principles of our faith tradition teach us to overcome barriers with spiritual practices.

Building beloved community is a spiritual practice for us as individuals and for us as a faith community. Building relationships is a spiritual practice. Grace, gratitude and love are spiritual practices. Spiritual because they are grounded in our deepest-held values and beliefs. Practices because we do them over and over, we mess up, we learn, we atone, and we do them again. Practice makes progress. (So not perfection!)

This is the work of our faith tradition and our religious community-building beloved community. Creating together a place where we can think and be different, and be loved; where we can mess up and cause hurt, learn and be redeemed; where we can be with complexity and paradox, and not rush to fix it; where we live into our interconnection with all that is; where we are warm and generous of spirit; where we work and play together in joy; and where we come together in covenant. A faith community that is spiritually-rooted, spiritually alive, anti-racist and acting for collective liberation. That is a community I want to be part of and help create.

At OUUC we come together in covenant, making mutual promises to be generous, responsive, engaged, responsible, direct, honest, and loving. We are called to this covenant and by each other to be willing to transform ourselves as individuals and collectively into the community that we aspire to be.

In the weeks to come you will be invited to gather in cottage meetings and congregational meetings to envision the future of OUUC in the Vision, Mission and Ends project. I hope you've heard about it and have participated in the survey so far. Soon you'll be able to sign up for small group discussions. This is the chance for you to bring your open heart and open mind to a discussion of how we can build beloved community within OUUC and beyond. In the months ahead, I invite you to be loving, to be loved, and to be in community as we envision the future.

I know that there have been some hard discussions and meetings here in the past. There may be hard moments in these upcoming meetings, too; moments of ouch or hurt or harm. I hope not, and I also know that they can happen, despite our best intentions.

Last week I spoke about spiritual practices as a way to be together and different, and some of you asked where to go to practice. You don't have to go anywhere else, the opportunity to practice is right here. These discussions are a chance to practice being in covenant, hearing differences, being curious, being with discomfort, loving and being loved. This is how we build beloved community. I hope you will answer this call of love.

At the end of 2020 as I reflected on my year-long journey with love, I realized that I do experience an ever-abiding love that holds us all. That love is fierce and revolutionary. It does not promise that everything will be OK or that anything will be easy. It does remain and is there every time I turn toward it, within myself, within others, between us and beyond. It is the love that calls us to reconciliation and redemption, the love that calls us to compassion and justice, the love that calls us to the grand adventure of beloved community.

May we feel held in that love now as we bring our hopes and aspirations into a time of silence together.