

“The Challenge of Beloved Community: Part I”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

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<https://youtu.be/zASqgaQ8t7c>

This is part one of a two-part talk given that morning.

I don't typically give the talk on the first Sunday of the month; it's almost always up to Rev. David to introduce our monthly themes on these first Sundays. The themes often are timeless concepts, things we have some shared definitions of, things like gratitude or imagination. So we don't usually have to give a basic definition. And by the time I get around to talking about the theme, I can just dive in.

Not so this month, when our theme is beloved community. Beloved community is not so much a timeless concept as a modern philosophical creation. And it's not something that many of us can quickly explain off the top of our heads. Even as a minister, I discovered that, for me, the phrase "beloved community" evoked more feelings than words - it was something I had experienced more than articulated.

So what might we mean by beloved community? What is this idea that can seem so simple at its core and yet so challenging to bring about? Let's look at what some of our wisest thinkers and leaders have to say.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King is the public figure most associated with the idea of beloved community. He didn't originate the term, but he did popularize it, and he spoke about it frequently during his brief but brilliant lifetime. To boil down King's many thoughts and remarks on the concept, the King Center in Atlanta offers a good, concise explanation. King did not see the beloved community as a lofty utopia achieved in the end times; rather, he saw it, [in the King Center's words](#), as:

...A realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence. 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..... Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

Now, that that may in fact sound a little lofty and utopian to those of us living here in these less-than-harmonious times. But Dr. King lived in very turbulent times himself. He was an African-American leader speaking out amid the white supremacist violence of the South; he was not sitting at home dreaming and theorizing about beloved community from inside a bubble of comfort.

And his message about beloved community was essentially humanist. He wasn't saying that God was going to come down and bring about the beloved community; he believed that human beings, acting in ways of nonviolence and love, could make it happen if they chose.

For King, the love at the core of beloved community was agape love, which he described as "understanding, redeeming goodwill for all," an "overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative." King said that "Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both...Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community."

This type of love is consistent with [the Unitarian Universalist principles](#) we hear each week at the beginning of our Sunday gatherings. The first UU principle talks about the inherent worth and dignity of each person - there's no distinction between worthy and unworthy people, because, as King said, all are worthy. And our sixth principle, "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all" aligns well with what King was talking about.

To find the true origins of the concept of beloved community, we have to jump back at least a half-century from King, and take a look at the words of the American philosopher Josiah Royce.

Royce, like King, was both a hopeful Christian and an earthbound realist about the challenges and evil goings-on of this world, and both men had great faith for what humanity could achieve. According to the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), Royce encouraged his fellow human beings to respond to the forces of evil by adopting "the attitude of loyalty to goodness and truth, which, as real forces in the world, are the metaphysical opposite of evil."

Interestingly, Royce's roadmap to the beloved community focuses less on love and more on loyalty. Dr. Jackie Kegley, [writing about Royce in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#), describes Royce's beloved community as consisting of "all those who would be fully dedicated to the cause of loyalty, truth, and reality itself."

Loyalty, truth, and reality itself. Royce died more than 100 years ago, but his priorities seem especially on point in this moment we are living in, when loyalty to the truth is hardly a given, and a significant percentage of the country does not seem fully dedicated to "reality itself." It's also worth noting that Royce drew a distinction between a positive, moral loyalty, and the more sinister, "predatory" kind of loyalty, as he called it; indeed, in our own time, we have recently seen the ugly places where unthinking, amoral loyalty can lead.

So, beloved community can be a vision of global society, and it can be linked to our human loyalties. What else might it be? Well, the Rev. Victoria Safford of the White Bear UU Church here in Minnesota describes beloved community as less of a destination than an approach to life and the world. [She writes](#):

The Beloved Community [is] ... a way of being - spiritually, politically, economically, emotionally, intellectually. Beloved Community is an attitude, an orientation of the heart; it's a disciplined understanding of your own relationship to other people, to everyone else on the planet, to every living thing. If you are religious, this is a religious discipline, and it goes by many names....If you are an ethical humanist, it is a deliberate moral stance. It is a daily practice, a spiritual politics, that requires inclusivity, nonviolence, and the hard discipline of radical hospitality. It requires love, agape.

So, in Rev. Safford's view, beloved community is an outlook and a discipline, an outlook and discipline guided by love.

One more interpretation of beloved community that I'd like to share comes from Father Gregory Boyle. Boyle is a Jesuit priest in California who for decades has run the country's largest rehabilitation program for gang members. He's dedicated his life to working directly with those whom many view as unworthy. And [when Boyle thinks about beloved community](#), the word he focuses on is kinship:

The measure of our compassion lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them... That's what we want to achieve, this sense of mutuality, where we obliterate once and for all the illusion that we are separate. No us and them. Just us. For there's an idea that's taken root in the world; it's at the root of all that is wrong with it... And the idea would be this: that there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives. How do we stand against that idea?

So in Boyle's beloved community, there are no outsiders, and humans all have a sense, a feeling, of kinship with one another.

After reflecting on all these words from these different thinkers as they describe and elaborate on the idea of beloved community, I realize that maybe my initial reaction – that it's a feeling, something experiential – is a part of the picture, too.

For me, beloved community brings to mind family reunions when I was a kid – big, sprawling, outdoor gatherings on both my mother's and my father's sides. While there were significant differences in careers, incomes, politics, and personalities in these families, everyone was worthy of an invitation, and there was a spirit of abundance – of food, laughter, and lots of other kids to play with even if you didn't know them very well. I felt beloved and cared for, and I felt community.

Another place I've felt this – and I think I've mentioned this before – is at Pride festivals, particularly when I was a younger adult. All manner of difference is part of the pageantry of humanity at a GLBTQ Pride festival. One might feel affirmed by seeing other people like oneself, but even if there was no one exactly like you, it was clear that the full rainbow of humanity was worthy, regardless of who you might be. I used to dread the end of Pride weekend and could feel my guard going back up a when I had to re-enter the pigeonholes of the regular world, a world which fell farther short of the ideals of beloved community.

And I know I've mentioned before the sense of beloved community that I experienced in the fall of 2019 at the national symposium of [Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism](#). I was there as a white ally and listener, and even though my experiences were not centered, I felt safe and loved and valued because of the care and hospitality, and because the whole event had an inherently inclusive culture that centered everyone's humanity. As I've heard activists say, "What's good for black

people is good for people," and events like the symposium can evoke the beloved community.

You perhaps noticed a commonality in these beloved-community experiences I've mentioned: they were all temporary events. The ideals of agape love and valuing everyone are actually not that complicated, but they can be very challenging to sustain over time or in permanent institutions. Still, all the thinkers I've cited this morning agree that beloved community is something worth striving for, even if it's work that will extend beyond our lifetimes.

This morning I'm very grateful to be sharing the space of our Sunday talk with FUS member Amanda Harrington, who's going to look at what beloved community might mean for our congregational community. Before I go, I want to leave you with a question I've asked our congregation before: "What would it be like if every kind-hearted humanist who came through our doors could find a place here?"

With our physical doors closed and our online doors open as wide as ever, it's a good time to reflect on our role in creating beloved community. Here's Amanda to tell us more.