

Beloved Community

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Sunday, February 14, 2021 (online)

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: “We Are Gathered” (tune Nettleton, words A. Udis-Kessler),
#121 “We’ll Build a Land.” Choir: “I Love the Rose,” “Like a Tree.”

Readings

#1 This reading is from a commentary by the Rev. Christine Robinson posted in May of 2013 on her iMinister blog. Robinson is the minister emerita of the First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque. This is entitled Beloved Community.

My mother, who lives in a senior community which is a ministry of the United Methodist Church, told me today she had a religious question. What, she asked, was the meaning of the term *Beloved Community*? It seems that this phrase is turning up all around her and she does not really understand what is being described, is not sure she will approve when she knows, and is feeling generally cranky about the whole thing. Forgetting something which I used to know—which is the this is a term that Martin Luther King used to describe a community in which people were treated fairly—I blithered a bit about Beloved Community being a community where people were good to each other, took care of each other, and so on. She was *all for* that sort of thing, but hated the term and wanted to know if I used it. As a matter of fact, although I hear the term a lot, I am not particularly comfortable with it either. But I had never stopped to ask myself what my problem was and finally said: “I guess I just think it’s a bit over the top.” My mother liked that. “I’m glad to make friends here,” she said. “But, *beloved*, ...really... that’s my husband.”

#2 The next reading is from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Junior. In a famous essay, he spoke of three different kinds or categories of love—romantic love, or eros; deep friendship, or philia, and unconditional goodwill, or agape [ah-GAH-pay]. Here are Dr. King’s words about agape, adapted, from 1963:

Agape is more than romantic love, agape is more than friendship. Agape is understanding, creative, redemptive, good will to all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. Theologians would say that it is the love of God operating in the human heart. So that when one rises to love on this level, they love others *not* because they like them, not because their ways appeal to them, but they love everyone because *God* loves everyone.



Sermon: Beloved Community

In last Sunday's service we learned about the proposed 8th Principle for Unitarian Universalism, a principle to inspire a journey toward spiritual wholeness in the dismantling of systemic racism. The proposal contains a famous phrase—Beloved Community. The proposal envisions that UU congregations will be “working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions...to dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” Some people have inquired about the implications of that phrase. Where does it come from and what does it mean? After all, it's Beloved with a capital B and Community with a capital C, so it must be important. It is! And I'm happy to speak to it this morning.

The term goes back over a century, coined by a philosopher at Harvard University who was brought up in California. He was Josiah Royce, after whom UCLA has a building on campus called Royce Hall. He lived for 60 years, from 1855 till 1916. His parents were immigrants from England who met on the East Coast of the US and ended up in Grass Valley. One of three children, Josiah was born there in 1855. At age 11, just after the Civil War, he moved to San Francisco for school. Then he got a degree in Classics at UC Berkeley—which was in Oakland back then. After a time of study in Germany, he became the fourth person to earn a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Afterwards, Royce taught English for a few years at UC Berkeley. Then he went to Harvard, near Boston, and taught and wrote there for the rest of his life. In addition to teaching philosophy, his pursuits included the sciences, the new field of psychology, racial justice, and international relations. In 1886 Royce wrote a history of California, which he subtitled *A Study of American Character*.

According to writer Joe Matthews, this book of history “was ahead of its time in focusing on the role of women and demonstrating how the state was built on the exploitation of non-whites.” Royce condemned our treatment of Native Americans—“from land theft to lynchings,” as well as discrimination against immigrant workers and their families. Royce's interest in what a *community* is began at an early age. He grew up around the mines of Nevada County. He watched his town of Grass Valley “develop from a camp into a town, with a local government, schools, taverns, churches and newspapers.” Looking back on his life, Royce wrote: “My earliest recollections include a very frequent wonder as to what my elders meant when they said this was a new community.”¹

Royce's work stressed our need for connection to others and the need for loyalty to causes larger than ourselves. Royce once wrote that the religions of both Buddhism and Christianity teach a stark lesson. He said: "The detached individual is essentially a lost being." Royce wasn't against individual expression or liberty, but he wanted to highlight that individuals are shaped and held by communities. We are inter-dependent.² He said: "My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community."

Another influence on Royce is known as the Social Gospel, a movement of the late 1800s. Led by Progressive Protestant ministers, the Social Gospel said that instead of working to save souls from hell, devout Christians must work toward ending the *hellish conditions* in which growing numbers of Americans were suffering. Social Gospelers engaged in political reforms and political activism, labor organizing, and making America's crowded cities cleaner, safer places to live. They aimed not to save souls but to *save lives*. The Social Gospel called for bringing the Kingdom of God into reality by creating a society to match the values of Jesus of Nazareth. They called it the Kingdom of God, but it fits Royce's vision of Beloved Community. He wrote that: "Every proposed reform, every moral deed, is to be tested by whether and to what extent it contributes to the realization of the Beloved Community."

Throughout the 20th century, the heritage of the Social Gospel Movement and the words of Josiah Royce echoed through progressive religious groups and seminaries. One of those was the School of Theology at Boston University, a Methodist institution where Martin Luther King Jr. earned his Ph.D. in the early 1950s. Within two decades Dr. King would be describing the campaigns for Civil Rights, economic justice, anti-militarism and human rights as the work of building the Beloved Community. Dr. King's oratory gave *Beloved Community* a big boost.

Yet one might ask, *beloved* by whom? Well, given the religious origins of the vision, it seems fair to say that a community which honors human diversity, treats the vulnerable with compassion, and pursues justice and mercy/ is beloved by the Divine. Moreover, if a community is able to make strides toward fairness, compassion and respect ...so that everyone might thrive, then surely it is *beloved* by those who create it, and share in it, and enjoy it.

I can understand why it could be a stretch to call any group a Beloved Community. It feels idealistic, maybe even Utopian. It can seem like too big of a term to use in an imperfect organization like a congregation—or any organization which has people in it! Maybe it *is* idealistic. For many of us, however, it is ideals which can shape our lives and give us courage. Ideals guide our actions. They call us forward.

The 8th Principle for Unitarian Universalism is an ideal and a commitment. And so are the other seven UU Principles. I wonder which two or three of the Principles call you forward? You could say we will not achieve any of them once and for all. That's true, but as we move toward them, perhaps we will experience them as a reality. This is the role of ideals for us.

When Dr. King explained the Greek word *agape*, he was lifting up such an ideal. *Agape* speaks to the universal quality of love—that is, generosity and kindness toward all, even those we don't know. *Agape* is unconditional acceptance and goodwill toward other people simply because they are human. In Atlanta, the Martin Luther King Center explains his view of Beloved Community in this way: "For Dr. King, Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with [an] image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in ...harmony. Rather, [it] was for him 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 was not devoid of ... conflict. Instead, he recognized that conflict was an inevitable part of human experience. But he believed that conflicts could be resolved... through a mutual, determined commitment to nonviolence. No conflict, he believed, need erupt in violence. And all conflicts in the Beloved Community should end with reconciliation of adversaries cooperating ... in a spirit of ... goodwill..."

This is an appealing aspiration. It sounds good for society at large, but up close—it's hard. The late Henri Nouwen, a spiritual teacher and Catholic priest from the Netherlands, had this to say: "Community is not easy. Somebody once said, 'Community is the place where *the person you least want to live with*... always lives.'"

Alex Kapitan and the Reverend Mykal Slack are Unitarian Universalist religious professionals and young leaders in our denomination. They write: "Beloved Community is when we say 'we,' and we mean everyone. However, this doesn't mean we can assume everyone is alike or thinks all the same.... When commonality is presumed, when we make *assumptions* about who's present and whether people are 'like us,' or not [like us], we're not practicing Beloved Community.... We're not called to be like-minded; we're called to be like-hearted."

Yet, they acknowledge that embracing difference is not without discomfort. They write: "Beloved Community exists when we trust each other, we have the relationships, the strong-enough relationships to actually disagree with each other, to be in conflict, ... and we can stay in relationship through those disagreements, and conflict, and potential hurt. That's practicing Beloved Community."

The Reverend Victoria Safford writes: "The Beloved Community [is] not a goal or destination, [or a] dream, but instead 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 seeking spiritual wholeness [and] balance, it is a spiritual discipline. If you are an ethical humanist, it is a deliberate moral stance. It is a daily practice, a spiritual politics. [It] requires inclusivity, nonviolence, and the ... discipline of radical hospitality." Safford says, "It requires love, agape."

I wonder when you have seen this in practice in your life, and here at UUSS? I wonder in what moments you might have encountered it— in what moments you might have experienced it? I wonder if you believe that your presence here, makes it possible? I believe this. I *know* this. Your presence makes it possible. It makes love possible.

The Beloved Community is an ideal that calls us forward. It is the presence of a committed and loyal group of individuals, who are people of like hearts if not always of like minds. It is an attitude we try to practice. And it can be an experience we encounter, if we open ourselves to it. At its heart, it is love. So may it be, now and always

¹ Joe Matthews, "Philosopher Josiah Royce — California's greatest thinker," *Desert Sun*, June 23, 2019. Accessed Feb. 12, 2022. <https://www.desertsun.com/story/opinion/columnists/2019/06/13/californias-prescient-19th-century-philosopher-josiah-royce-joe-mathews-connecting-california/1450415001/>

² "Individuals without community are without substance, while communities without individuals are blind," he wrote.