

What is Beloved Community?

Readings: 'If God Invited You to a Party' by Hafez
'In Gatherings' by Marta Valentín
'Frederick Douglass' by Robert Hayden

Last May, the members of this congregation approved new mission and vision statements. The mission is 'People's Church: A beloved community embracing and serving our diverse world.' The vision is Aligning with the Principles of the UUA while growing in love, People's Church:

- Builds a diverse and inclusive loving community
- Freely searches for truth and meaning
- Provides solace and rejuvenation
- Embraces equity and pursues Social Justice
- Cares for our planet Earth, the home we share with all living things

These are strong goals that give me, as your minister, a clear sense of what you want this religious community to be. I am grateful to all of you who helped create these statements through your participation in small group conversations, analyzing and sorting of what people said at those meetings, writing drafts, giving feedback, and paying careful attention to words.

Over the last months, I've been reading and reflecting on these statements with your board, staff, and other church leaders. In these conversations, it has become clear that while they give me a clear sense of where we want to go, that isn't true for everyone who reads them. One question has arisen again and again, 'what does beloved community mean, exactly?' People usually add caveats that they've heard the phrase before and it sounds nice, but realize that if they are going to be among the leaders helping us live into this mission, they should have a better understanding... and when the same question comes up in a few different ways, I know it is time for a sermon, so here we are.

First, the history of the phrase. The phrase 'Beloved Community' was coined by Josiah Royce, a philosopher of religion and ethics, just over 100 years ago. Royce spent most of his career engaged in abstract hypotheticals. After the death of his young adult son, he became more interested in how we live together. He began thinking about the nature of communities. He asserted that communities are formed by loyalty and that everyone is loyal to something. Communities are created out of shared loyalty and community is necessary for life to have meaning. He writes, "My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community." He developed a way of categorizing communities based on what kind of loyalty bound them together. There are communities that are bound together by vicious or predatory loyalty. These groups have clearly defined in-groups and out-groups and disdain for the people who aren't part of their communities. These sorts of communities can be created around anything that insiders believe is the one truth, religious or political. There are communities that, in Joyce's words, harmonize with a universal ideal, who do not create divisions between in groups and outgroups, who have everyone's best interest at heart, but not in a patronizing, we-know-what's-in-your-best-interest-better-than-you-do sort of way. He calls these 'genuine communities.' We might know some of

these communities in our lives and in our world. They tend to be humble, open to new people and new information, willing to adjust plans to do the most good.

Then Royce names 'The Beloved Community.' It is an ideal that doesn't yet exist, though we might catch glimpses of it when genuine communities are at their very best. A Beloved Community is one in which all are loyal to love and truth and whose actions are always guided by love and truth.¹

Martin Luther King Jr. read Josiah Royce during his academic preparations for ministry. He borrowed the phrase 'Beloved Community' and expanded upon it, making it one of the central themes in his ministry and preaching. Over and over again, he shared his vision of Beloved Community, a society based on equity, love and justice for all, a world where there are no enemies, only temporary opponents who will one day be friends. In the Beloved Community, no one is left behind.

In 1956, after the successful end of the Montgomery bus boycott, he preached, 'the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.'²

In 1963, he preached, 'With every ounce of our energy we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation. But we shall not in the process relinquish our privilege and our obligation to love. While abhorring segregation, we shall love the segregationist. This is the only way to create the beloved community.'³

In a Christmas sermon from 1967, he said, "We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."⁴

Beloved Community is not about prevailing over others, having our vision win, but about doing the work of love and justice in big and small ways until everyone is transformed. The Beloved Community writes no one off and leaves no one behind.

Another source of wisdom about the Beloved Community is our very own David Isaacson. I purchased research assistance from him at the church auction last year and set him to work on this topic. In addition to gathering up the quotes you just heard and other resources that helped me prepare the service today, he sent me his own musings on the topic. They read, in part:

¹ Parker, Kelly A., "Josiah Royce", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/royce/>.

² King, Jr. Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

³ King, Jr. Martin Luther. 'Loving your enemies' in *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2012.

⁴ Quoted in Greg, Carl. "What Do We Mean when We Say 'Building the Beloved Community'?" <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2015/03/what-do-we-mean-when-say-building-the-beloved-community/>

It is useful to meditate on the phrase “beloved community” by considering each word by itself and then to put them back together. To be beloved one has to “be loving.” You can’t be a beloved person unless you learn to love yourself (with lots of forgiveness and patience) first. This kind of self-love is modest, not prideful; it celebrates the good we find in ourselves that we may want to share with others. So to be loved one has to try to understand that loving is a state of “being” that encourages us to act in such good ways that others are attracted to us... The word beloved may be better understood to bind both the words “be” and “loved” together. The word beloved has a more exalted meaning than just the word loved. The ideal of being beloved suggests to me a deeper spiritual-religious state than the “merely” ethical idea of love all by itself.

*David continues, ‘Similarly, if you meditate a bit on some deeper meanings of community you might think of taking communion with others. This need not be restricted to the Christian ceremony of communion, but to a larger [Unitarian Universalist] sense that seeks communion, meaning a deliberate, highly serious (some might call this sacred) act of binding oneself to others in seeking some goal higher than simply having fun together... The community that is beloved does not seek only to congratulate one another on how loving and loved they are. If you are trying to live by [Unitarian Universalist] principles, you seek to demonstrate loving behavior to others outside the immediate beloved community. The first beloved community is a well-functioning family – and this need not be limited to legal marriages. The beloved community should extend outward beyond the family to include friends with opinions like ours. But that part is easy, and requires little effort... If we want to truly practice what King meant by acting in a beloved community such as we seek with one another in People’s Church, we should (I’m tempted to say **must** rather than should) extend ourselves beyond the immediate family and circles of friends, to include others we may not think we have anything in common with... We may be afraid of these others. But it is especially these distant others that King seems to have in mind when he seeks to inspire his listeners and readers to challenge us to seek out those who do not share our values of seeking justice, peace, [and kinship]. Perhaps, by example and gentle persuasion, we can convert people who do not practice these principles of living in right relations to one another. In other words, the beloved community seeks to include anyone who would like to love and to be loved (or beloved) and, once realizing they do love and are beloved, they will want to be members of a like-minded community of others seeking the same loving goals.’⁵*

So good, right?

I sometimes think of beloved community as a backstop on a baseball diamond. For all you non-sports people, the backstop is a chain link fence behind home plate on a baseball field. There’s a picture of one on your order of service. The backstop is there to stop the ball from going off in an unexpected direction – whether from a wild pitch or a foul ball from the batter or the catcher making a mistake and letting a ball pass by. It protects the people watching the game, other nearby people, and the windshields of cars parked nearby. On baseball fields for children, there is always a backstop, but they become less common as players develop skills. Professionals don’t get backstops.

⁵ From personal correspondence

This image of a backstop is one of the ways I understand community. In this metaphor, my life is the baseball game. Most of the time, the game continues on without anyone noticing the backstop, but there are times when it is vital. There are the wild pitches, foul balls, and passed balls of life – the times my life is touched by illness, death, overwhelm, that unexpected expense that wrecks my budget, or a problem in my work, my marriage, or my life that I don't know how to work through.

That's when I need my backstop, my community, to keep the ball from veering off wildly and causing an injury, smashing a windshield, or causing me to lose the game. There's a lot of people in my backstop – the colleagues and mentors I turn to for professional advice, the family I can borrow money from in a pinch, the neighbors and friends who will babysit my kids, the people I trust for parenting and marriage commiseration and advice, good health insurance, friends with spare rooms that I could move into if everything truly falls apart and I don't have anywhere to live. The backstop includes many of you, who I know I can turn to, if needed. Knowing the backstop is there makes the game easier to play. It allows me to be bolder. Any mistake or accident or unforeseen circumstance won't destroy me or my family.

And I know that part of my backstop is privilege. Too few of us have family with money to lend or friends with spare rooms and open invitations or access to quality healthcare. So many in our world are playing the game with no backstop or great big holes in their backstop, where they have support for certain problems but not others.

For me, the beloved community, the community in which all are loyal to love and truth and whose actions are always guided by love and truth, looks like everyone playing their baseball game of life with a strong backstop. In the Beloved Community there is enough love and support that when the wild pitches, passed balls, and foul balls of life come – and they come for us all – the ball is stopped by the backstop before it causes a catastrophe. In the metaphor of Beloved Community, there are no smashed windshields or injured passersby. In the Beloved Community, an illness or an unexpected expense does not cause homelessness. A lost job does not lead to a health crisis. When life overwhelms, we have communities of support and care who show up and keep things from getting worse.

This church aspires to be the Beloved Community for one another, to be the chain link fence that keep accidents and injuries and unforeseen circumstances from turning into catastrophic losses. We show up for one another in big and small ways. We send cards to one another and have blankets to give people who are hospitalized. The minister's discretionary fund steps in to help People's people when small amounts of money can make a big difference. And we strive to communicate love and care and kindness in our interactions with one another. We don't always get it right, but that is our aspiration and when we fall short, we make amends and try again to get it right.

And we know that our mission to be a Beloved Community is not about being a backstop only for the people who are part of the church. We don't aspire to be a Beloved Community only for the people who have signed the Bond of Union and become members of the church, or the people who regularly attend, or the people who tell me "I don't go to church, but if I did, it would be People's Church." Beloved Community is for everyone. It's impossible to draw lines around a

beloved community and keep some people in and some people out. That's a gated community, not a beloved community.

You all know this. That's why the second half of our mission is there too. We aspire to be a Beloved Community that embraces and serves our diverse world.

You all are ambitious. You have set as the mission of the community nothing less than the transformation of society. We know we won't achieve that any time soon. But there is value in choosing a goal that seems impossible and working toward it with care and thought, intention and love. All of the great work seems impossible at first.

Unitarian Universalist folk singer Pete Seeger once said, "The world is like a seesaw out of balance: on one side is a box of big rocks, tilting it its way. On the other side is a box, and a bunch of us with teaspoons, adding a little sand at a time. One day, all of our teaspoons will add up, and the whole thing will tip, and people will say, 'How did it happen so fast?'"

It is our mission to be the people with the teaspoons, to act with loyalty to love and truth, to invite others to join us with teaspoons with our words, but mostly our actions.

There are about 450 People's people, roughly 250 members, 50 other adults who participate in our life together, and 150 children and youth. The creation of the Beloved Community would be impossible if it was our task alone. It isn't. We have partners in this work. There are other people who are loyal to truth and love. There are other Unitarian Universalists, but the vision of the beloved community is not ours alone. One of our most important partners in advancing the Beloved Community is ISAAC, interfaith strategy for advocacy and action in the community, a group of 28 other congregations and community organizations that come together to make real change in our community.

I already told you once today to come to the public meeting on Thursday the 25th. Please come. It is powerful to see us all together, across lines of race and class and religion and identity doing what needs to be done to get Kalamazoo County closer to the Beloved Community.

Our closing song today is the song that I think of as ISAAC theme song, as I've sung it in many ISAAC gatherings, though it is also increasingly popular in Unitarian Universalist circles. It is by Hezekiah Walker, a pastor and grammy winning musician. The song makes me think of backstops and teaspoons of sand and the way we try to live loyalty to truth and love here. I know there are parts of it that might not fit your theology. There are parts that don't fit my theology. Part of the work of Beloved Community is recognizing that sometimes we sing songs that aren't perfect fits for us because they help us be in community with others. And that community, that work toward the Beloved Community is more important.

Let us do that now.