

“Beloved Community: Beyond Warm and Fuzzy”

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This congregation uses the Soul Matters monthly themes and resource packet to help coordinate the topics we cover in worship and in our children’s religious education program. This month, we have been considering the idea of Beloved Community, in conjunction with the national recognition of Black History Month.

Dr. King understood Beloved Community as more than an elusive utopian existence; he understood that there would be disagreements and conflicts, and he envisioned a community that was committed to being together such that they were willing to work out those differences to achieve a greater common goal: the eradication of injustice.¹ (The Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change n.d.)

Honestly, any relationship is work. Think of the effort required to be in relationship with family and friends. Think about the amount of work it takes to have a successful marriage or intimate partnership. Each person brings to the relationship a set of ideas and ideals, habits and traditions, food preferences and political leanings. Over the course of time, the people involved must figure out how the dance of give-and-take is going to go. Each person is going to have to give a little on some things. It is our willingness to give a little that makes the relationship possible.

As part of that flexibility is the intentional practice of listening and hearing the other people. You might think that such a notion as communication is so basic as to be unnecessary to mention, but I assure you it is not. Communication – real communication – about feelings, and fears and hopes, requires courage and selflessness and compassion.

Real communication requires one party to be capable and willing to hear, and another party willing and capable to speak their truth.

Hearing uncomfortable things is, well, uncomfortable. I don’t know anyone who likes it. And yet, to be in community, to be committed to a relationship based in equity, compassion, and justice, we need to be able to hear things that make us uncomfortable. We need to be willing to be wrong and to change. To give a little ground.

I find that for me, I get most defensive when someone mentions a thing I do that is hurtful and it never occurred to me that I could be hurting someone.

My brain almost automatically responds “what the hell? Who ever gets offended by that? What new rule did I break now?” as though I am the offended party. As though I

¹ <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

was the one being oppressed, put upon, inconvenienced. I am offended that someone has pointed out that I have metaphorical toilet paper stuck to my shoe. As though it's *their* fault that I hurt them.

I like to think that I am a good and kind person. Perhaps you feel the same way, that you believe yourself to be good and kind.

Still, we don't know what we don't know.

And to be in relationship, that means we must be willing to be wrong, to apologize, and to change.

I've been reading this week a book called "Faith Without Certainty" -- it's by Paul Rasor, a UU minister and super-smart professor/author/lecturer type guy. Wicked smart, as we say in Maine.

In this book, Rasor talks about some of the pitfalls that liberal religious people encounter when we try to form communities. We're actually kind of bad at it, particularly when we try to address issues of race.

Rasor writes:

COMMUNITY. Our efforts to become genuinely antiracist are hampered by a liberal ambivalence around issues of community. One of the factors at work here is the human tendency to want community on our own terms, a community of people 'like us.' But for liberals, additional difficulties emerge out of the tensions inherent in our tradition. Liberals want to create a strong and inclusive community, but we often want to do it without giving up anything, without letting down the barriers we erect around ourselves in the name of individual autonomy. We wade into the waters of community up to our knees, but we're afraid to let go of the dock and plunge in with our whole bodies."²

Community is an extended network of intersecting relationships. It is only logical then, that creating and maintaining something we can call "Beloved Community" is a complicated and difficult task. Humans are biologically wired to seek out sameness, familiarity, safety. Yet we know that those things are part and parcel of a system of power and privilege that is unjust and, frankly, evil. The very notion that European white people were superior to everyone else was the founding ethos of those white Europeans who first colonized this continent. It is literally in our cultural DNA.

But now we are in the year 2021, and we know that concept to be wrong. Not only is it wrong, but it has been used for 400 years to oppress and abuse, to exclude and torture, to visit unspeakable violence and degradation on people of all kinds of races other than

² Rasor, Paul [Faith Without Certainty](#), 2005 Skinner House, Boston p. 178

white, in a system set up by for and about the notion of white supremacy. We cannot deny this reality. It may not be our fault, here in 2021, but it IS our problem to fix.

As we examine this history and how it still benefits white people and oppresses everyone else, we must move beyond our reflexive defenses and get vulnerable. One of the things that liberals do to keep ourselves at a comfortable distance from this UNcomfortable issue is to default to theoretical, rational discourses. We get super uptight when faced with something that makes us uncomfortable. We resort to structure and rules, to philosophy and abstractions, to Roberts Rules of Order, and away from any emotional pain associated with our own complicity in the continuing injustice.

Rasor explains how this hamstrings us in this way:

“Our deep-seated fear of community, when combined with our tendency toward formalism and abstraction, leads to a fear of otherness that we have barely begun to recognize and address. Fear of the Other manifests itself in such liberal ideals as autonomy, self-reliance, and the like, and prevents us from seeing that we are truly social selves. Liberal and political social theory, too often echoed in liberal religion, tends to protect the individual *from* the community, from true engagement with the Other.” (Rasor 2005)

Liberals like to spend a lot of time in our brains. It’s safer there, mostly. We don’t have to fully engage with messy emotions and passions and physical expressions of anything. I spoke about this on Valentine’s Day and the toxic legacies of shame left to us by both Augustine of Hippo and William Ellery Channing.

“We liberals are often better at formality and abstraction than at getting our hands dirty and our feet moving. We sincerely want things to be right in the world, but we also want them to be tidy. Both justice work and community are often messy, and our discomfort with messiness weakens the prophetic power of our words and actions.” (Rasor 2005)

And it is that kind of courage that we need if we are to engage in the creative work of establishing actively anti-racist Beloved Communities.

In her book *So you want to talk about race*, Ijeoma Oluo cautions white people that this work is going to be uncomfortable, and that it is our work to do, not hers, or any other person of color.

Oluo stresses the importance of this work:

“Have these conversations, not just with people of other races ... You should be having these conversations with people of your own race as well. White people – talk about race with other white people. Stop pretending that you are exempt from the day-to-day realities of race. Take some of the burden of racism off

people of color. Bring it into your life so that you can dismantle racism in white spaces of your life that people of color can't even reach.”³

This is important – this is about white people investing in their own education around institutional racism and white supremacy culture.

We are Unitarian Universalists. We want to create these communities, but we'd like them to be tidy. We want to harvest the crop without doing the work of planting and weeding. We want to grow, but we don't want to change.

Dr. King understood that Beloved Community is not a utopian pipe dream, but the real, messy, difficult, intentional work of creating relationships and being accountable for our own learning and behavior.

As we wrap up Black History Month, I offer this challenge to us all: let us examine our vulnerable spots. Let us examine the places where we back up and say “NO! I can't!” or “I won't!” Let us be willing to get dirty, to hear tears and accusations and heartbreak and not deny our own complicity in the injustice.

We don't know what we don't know.

But when we know better, we are obligated to do better. THAT is the work before us: learn, change, and act.

May this practice be our prayer.

Amen.

Bibliography

Oluo, Ijeoma. *So you want to talk about race*. New York: Seal Press, 2018.

Rasor, Paul. *Faith Without Certainty*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005.

The Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change. *The King Center/about-tkc//the-king-philosophy*. n.d. <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/> (accessed February 27, 2021).

³ Oluo, Ijeoma, *So you want to talk about race*, Seal Press, 2018, New York. pp 51-52