

Whence “Beloved Community” and Whereto

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February 7, 2021

In the summer of 2009, when we all lived in a very different world, I took a trip with a bunch of other folks through Georgia and Alabama to visit important sites of the 1950’s and 60’s civil rights movement. That’s when I went to Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where Martin Luther King, Jr., pastored with his father and where the new senator Raphael Warnock is now senior pastor. I attended a Sunday service there and then spent the rest of the day on the grounds of the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historical Park and The King Center. In the park, they had several quotes from MLK displayed throughout the space, and one said this:

In a real sense all life is interrelated. All [of us] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality.

When I saw it, I thought well, there is my faith. This is how reality works. The way it’s described in the 7th UU principle is as “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

It seems to me that, even if just that is your starting point, if you look at it like an ecologist or a gardener, if everything is interdependent, then for something really to thrive—to thrive sustainably—it needs to be part of a community of mutual thriving. The UU minister Theresa Soto says “All of us need all of us to make it.”

Interdependence creatively urging toward mutual thriving is how I understand the term “beloved community.” Martin Luther King, Jr., is the one who brought the idea of “beloved community” into the public consciousness. A philosopher named Josiah Royce is the one who coined the term. But King is the one who brought it to life as living ethic and a living theology.

Beloved community is a practical goal to be achieved. On the King Center’s web site, they say:

For Dr. King, The Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony. Rather, The Beloved Community 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.¹

When UU's talk about social justice and what we're trying to achieve, we tend to say that the goal is Beloved Community.

But beloved community isn't just about a commitment to justice and morality. For King, it also describes how God is present in the world. In his book *Stride Toward Freedom* about the Montgomery bus boycott, King writes: "The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history."² This is about the kind of love that God demonstrates. Many times King called attention to how there are three different words for *love* used in the Greek that the Christian scriptures are written in. In "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma," King says:

We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization. The type of love that I stress here is not *eros*, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not *philia*, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is *agape* which is understanding goodwill for all men. It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It 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. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.

In our politically divided country and communities, it can sound a little unrealistic to talk about transforming "opposers into friends." Focus instead on King's faith that there is a love "seeking to preserve and create community." King says:

Agape is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape* is a willingness to go to any length to restore community.³

King points to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as an example of how far God will go to restore broken community. And because nothing exists alone, restoring broken community, continually creating community is what God is about in the world. King says, "In the final analysis, agape means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated."⁴ The only genuine thriving is mutual thriving. King says that the one "who works against community is working against the whole creation."⁵ To work against community is to work against nature and against love and against God.

Beloved community isn't our goal because we are a social justice organization. Beloved community is our goal because we are a faith community that recognizes that all life is interdependent and that what animates that interdependence into well-being is a radical love, a love radically holy and a love radically natural. It is the way life *works*. Beloved Community. Take it away or oppose it, and life doesn't work.

The UU minister Victoria Safford describes it this way:

The Beloved Community was not a goal or destination, and it was not any kind of idealistic, Christian utopian 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, spiritual 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, that requires inclusivity, nonviolence, and the hard discipline of radical hospitality.⁶

What I want to say is that, even in a divided land such as ours, with the again renewed threat of a violent, white supremacist nationalism, beloved community is something we can experience every day. Act in concert with agape, with beloved community, and you experience that love, agape, the beloved community. The good news of beloved community needs preaching and enacting, aiding and abetting now. As the musician Lea Morris sings in one of her songs, "we not only might, we must thrive."⁷

So what does that look like? What is the most loving thing to do? If you're using social media to spread lies and conspiracy theories, the most loving thing might be to take that tool away from them. If you've incited violence, you are being loved when

you are held accountable for it. Beloved community doesn't mean ignoring evil. Beloved community doesn't mean that every individual lives in the same house. If someone in your house is abusing you with lies and violence, the loving thing is for that person to be held accountable and for one or the other of you to live somewhere else. Beloved community means urging our city and county officials to take the governor's order to evaluate racial bias in policing as an opportunity to change the way we police our communities. While the virus still rages, beloved community means everyone staying as much as we can in our own house. Beloved community looks like worshipping and gathering online. "We not only might, we must thrive."

King says

Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless per and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.⁸

And that happens in big ways and in small ways. In Ross Gay's poem "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian," a fecund fig tree becomes the occasion for a creation of community, even

in Philadelphia a city like most
 which has murdered its own
 people
 this is true
 we are feeding each other
 from a tree
 at the corner of Christian and 9th
 strangers maybe
 never again.⁹

May you be the fig tree in a new story of community—resilient, generous, unrelentingly loving. May we be agents of beloved community in all the ways we can. May it be so.

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

² Martin Luther King, Jr. "An Experiment in Love." Included in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edited by James M. Washington. HarperOne, 1986. 20.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr. "An Experiment in Love."

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Nonviolence and Racial Justice." *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edited by James M. Washington. HarperOne, 1986.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Nonviolence and Racial Justice."

⁶ Victoria Safford. "Walking with the Wind." sermon preached 19 January 2020 at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in White Bear Lake, MN.

⁷ Lea Morris. "A New World." thisisLEA.com <https://youtu.be/Z9-UacuA-90>

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. "An Experiment in Love."

⁹ Ross Gay. "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian." <https://poets.org/poem/fig-tree-9th-and-christian>