



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

What Do We Mean We When Say, “Building the Beloved Community”?

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A new visitor to the congregation rises and shares her despair at not being able to find a job, another visitor expresses anguish at a relative’s newly diagnosed cancer. They feel like they are among friends, even tho they are strangers in a strange place. After the service, several people speak to them and extend their comfort and friendship.

A toddler wiggles away from his parents and heads down the aisle toward the door, perfectly confident that he is among friends. The “friends” gently intercept him, and , smiling, turn him around to toddle back to his family.

A shut-in elderly woman regularly sends pages from her Quote of the Day calendar to a leader of the congregation whom she suspects needs encouragement.

Someone quietly asks a parent if they could “borrow” an energetic 10 year old to help with the garden this Saturday. After the work is done, the two have a nice break for lunch and conversation.

Someone purchases artwork from the congregational show, pleased to have a work by someone they knew. The artist feels appreciated and proud to have that work in a friend’s house

A teen faithfully waters the church plants all Summer—pleased to be entrusted with a meaningful task, and happy to be paid, perhaps not knowing whose funds are used to pay him.

A couple’s passion for non-violence leads them to volunteer to teach in a prison. Others hear about this and are moved to join them.

Another is touched by the thought of children with absent or neglectful parents, going hungry on weekends when school breakfast and lunch is not available. Many are moved to join her in collecting food for a program that several other congregations share.

A strong show of support is needed for a change in legislation which furthers the worth and dignity of persons who are being discriminated against. Happily, supporters share rides to the capitol, or quickly write supporting letters to their legislators.

I have seen each of these things happen in this congregation. Think of the many more examples you may know and the ways either large or small that you may be called to contribute to building the Beloved Community in this place.

—Carole Larsen, UUCF Worship Associate

In the Spoken Meditation, Carole shared with us some important ways that we each, in large and small ways, help build the Beloved Community here at UUCF. And often in UU circles you will hear calls to “build the Beloved Community,” but I’m not sure we always appreciate the full historic resonance of that phrase.

The term “Beloved Community” was **coined by the early twentieth-century American philosopher Josiah Royce (1855-1916)**. But most of us learned it not from Royce but from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who often spoke of the “Beloved Community” as his ultimate goal. As an early example, after the Montgomery Bus Boycotts in speaking about the larger movement toward which they were building, **Dr. King said: “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 love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”**

Notice what King is *not* saying. He is not saying what we are often accustomed to hearing in our highly competitive society: that the end goal is a decisive — or even crushing — victory over our opponents. For King, building Beloved Community requires the even harder work of reconciliation, redemption, and being in right relationship — of “transforming opponents into friends.” As Dr. King said in his 1967 “A Christmas Sermon on Peace,” **“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.”** That’s what he meant by “a love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men”: practices like nonviolent activism that break open the hearts of your opponents, confronting them with the inherent worth and dignity of peoples and groups they falsely believed to be less than fully human.

According to The King Center:

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.**

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 of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

Dr. King's bold vision of "Beloved Community" is deeply resonant with our UU Principles: "The inherent worth and dignity of every person," "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all," and "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." But to what extent is it realistic?

Too look even farther back, the vision of **the "Beloved Community" is in many ways a secularized version of what Jesus called the "Kingdom of God."** But too often Jesus is confused with the White Queen from *Alice in Wonderland*. Christianity, however, is not about "believing six impossible things before breakfast"; rather, following the way of Jesus is about practicing radical kindness and compassion in our day just as Jesus did in his time and place — a love that dares to transgress cultural and tribal divisions. From that perspective, I think G.K. Chesterton's view on Christianity applies equally to Dr. King's vision of **the Beloved Community: "[it] has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."**

To give just one example, remember that for Dr. King, the Beloved Community was 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." Given the effectiveness we have seen of the practice of nonviolence in the movements led by King, Gandhi, and others, what would it mean to work toward having "a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence?" What might it look like if we reallocated even 1% of our nation's significant military budget for teaching nonviolent activism? And then 2% the next year? Then 3% and so on? How might such a paradigm shift help us move away from what Dr. King called the **three greatest threats to building the Beloved Community: racism, materialism, and militarism.** In our own lives, what would it look like to seek to communicate with one another — even when we are stressed out — with less harshness and more with nonviolent compassion.

Allow me to continue to take us back down to the interpersonal level with a story. **During my childhood, the closest glimpse I ever had to what the Beloved Community might look like was at summer camp.** Starting at age ten, I attended a camp in Black Mountain, North Carolina for two weeks each summer, which extended to four weeks at age 16, then six weeks as a junior counselor. During college, I would spend ten-to-twelve weeks there each summer first as a counselor, then as an age group director, and finally as the waterfront director.

As a young child, those two weeks each summer were like an almost perfect, idyllic Beloved Community. And I would sometimes think that we should just have the whole world live in summer camp all the time. But, of course, summer is but one season of the year. And in retrospect I can also see other angles there were invisible to me as a child: such as the race and class privilege that made that two weeks each summer possible. Also, as I became not a camper, but a counselor, I began to see that the summer was an exhausting sprint for the adults — that while exhilarating — was not sustainable year-round.

As a child I also envied the lives of the owners of the camp, who did live there year round. They were such fascinating people, and I used to think that even if camp wasn't sustainable long term for 400 campers and 150 staff, then it still must be for those families who were full-time residents at camp. But, again, as I grew up and entered the inner circle of the central staff, I began to see that even the phenomenal camp directors and owners, who did so much to create the magic of camp each summer were **human beings like the rest of us with imperfections and rivalries. And that for the most part, during the off-season they lived not in the Beloved Community, but instead retreated to their respective homes and families.**

My experience at summer was one of my earlier lessons in both the possibilities and the pitfalls of building the Beloved Community. In that spirit, allow me to share with you one more story, this one from our Unitarian Universalist heritage. In the 18th- and 19-centuries, our Unitarian and Universalist forbears in many ways defined themselves against Calvinistic pessimism.

- Rejecting the idea that human nature is characterized by “Total Depravity,” they taught “the inherent worth and dignity” of every human being (which we now know as our First Principle).
- Instead of some people being predestined to eternal torment, they taught that divine love was for all (which is the basis for the Universalist half of our heritage).

- Instead of a top-down, all-powerful, all-controlling God, they emphasized *human* freedom and *human* responsibility.

Thus, instead of Calvinistic pessimism, they had **tremendous optimism for the potential of both humanity and society.**

The most well-known distillation of that perspective was from the 19th-century Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke,” who characterized the new liberal theology as about:

- The Fatherhood of God,
- the Brotherhood of Man,
- the Leadership of Jesus,
- Salvation by Character,
- and the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever.

Can you hear the faith in inevitable progress, much of it fueled by the Industrial Revolution?

But that optimism did not rest solely with our forebears: **“One hundred nineteen communal and utopian societies were established in the United States between 1800 and 1859, and more than half of them...were formed during the ‘frenetic forties,’** a decade marked by some of the most intense reform fervor that America has ever witnessed” (xiv). I would like to share with you about only one of them: Brook Farm, a utopian experiment by some of our Transcendentalist forbears.

Unitarian minister George Ripley left his pulpit to help lead an experiment in creating the what they called the “city of God” — what we might call the “Beloved Community” on a 200-acre dairy farm called Brook Farm, nine miles outside of Boston (xiii). Sterling DeLane, author of **Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia**, writes that:

the **community is nostalgically recalled as a bucolic retreat** in which the days began with choruses of Mozart and Haydn by the Brook Farm choir, afternoons were interrupted in order to read Dante’s great work in the original, and evenings featured dramatic tableaux, lectures, and dancing. Life at Brook Farm often did resemble an Arcadian adventure, but what is **[rarely] acknowledged...is the desperation that came from unrelieved financial pressures, the loss of faith in Brook Farm’s leaders, and the class antagonisms that often smoldered beneath the surface of community civility.** (xi)

As you may can guess, when you are accustomed to an urban, literary “life of the mind,” it turns out that **a few months of reading agriculture books does not prepare you mentally, physically, or financially to run a 200-acre farm** (33, 43). And although the Transcendentalist residents of Brook Farm found the country life to be “invigorating” in many ways, a huge initial set back was that “after five full months of nearly back breaking physical labor around the farm, the community still had no reliable source of income or, even more alarming, a ‘feasible [financial] plan’ to sustain the Association’s future operations” (59).

And although the Brook Farm experiment lasted for six years from 1841 to 1847, two tragedies forced the community to collapse. First — and here I’ll let you draw your own parallels to today — there was a small pox outbreak in November 1845 because (you guessed it!), **“Many had never been vaccinated”** (245-6). Second, in March of the following year an **accidental fire destroyed a major new building project which had never been insured**, adding a devastating loss on top of major preexisting financial strain (254).

There are many potential lessons for us today from these utopian social hopes. One, is that **“intention does not equal impact.”** The residents of Brook Farm, particularly George Ripley, had the best of intentions and worked hard. But that is no guarantee of “progress, onward and upward forever.” Another lesson in retrospect is **not to neglect your strengths**. The founders of Brook Farm had a lofty, abstract, agrarian ideal of the farming life. But they did not have any significant previous “farming or business” experience (320). And although they were highly educated in general, they did not focus on the boarding school at Brook Farm even though education for them likely had a much stronger chance of being a reliable income stream than farming. For instance, **whereas “none of the other antebellum New England communities had more than one college-educated person involved in their educational program,” Brook Farm had *three* college-educated teachers in the school** (357).

Part of what I’m building toward is that even though the Calvinists were far too pessimistic about human nature, **our 19th-century forbears overcorrected with an overly naive hope in human potential and progress, particularly how easy and inevitable progress would be** (xv). But today, we live on the other side of the twentieth century — in the wake of the horrors of WWI and WWII, of Vietnam and Watergate.

Part of the reason the Brook Farm story is poignant for me is that my childhood summer camp I was telling you about earlier was founded in 1956. For the two previous decades, that mountain valley

around Lake Eden (where I swam in the summer and eventually became Waterfront Director) had been the sight of the **radical, progressive experiment in education known as Black Mountain College**. Visitors included such pathbreaking figures as philosopher John Dewey, playwright Thornton Wilder, novelist Henry Miller, writer Aldous Huxley, and musician John Cage. Buckminster Fuller erected the first geodesic dome on the field where I learned to play soccer and ultimate frisbee (97). It was an breathtakingly beautiful site with incredibly well-intentioned, gifted, innovative people. But **similar to Brook Farm, “Money was always an issue...and when the college disbanded every April, no one really knew if it would reopen the next fall”** (8). Eventually it do not reopen, allowing for the formation of a summer camp that continues to this day.

And part of why I wanted to preaching this morning on the subject of utopian social hopes and building the Beloved Community is that this afternoon at 4:00 p.m., we all invited to gather again in this sanctuary to celebrate our shared ministry in an Installation Service formally recognizing a shift from me serving as your Contract Minister (hired by the Board of Trustees) to serving as your Settled Minister (called by the full congregation).

And the most compelling reason that I chose congregational ministry over academia or other career paths is that I am **wary of merely writing abstractly about the potential of people, religious communities, or societies. Instead, I am interested in what is possible in the concrete reality of this religious community, through our shared ministry, and in our collective involvement in the larger community.**

And one of the reasons I chose Unitarian Universalism is that I share the social hopes of Josiah Royce and Dr. King, of Brook Farm and Black Mountain College. But as a citizen of the early twenty-first century, I also want to learn from their mistakes, even as I am grateful that we “stand on the shoulders of giants” who have gone before us.

I’m incredibly grateful for all that we have accomplished together the last few years, and I look forward to working together with you in building the Beloved Community for many years to come.