

Building Beloved Community
Sermon by Rev. Sarah Schurr

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Beloved Community. When we hear this term we often think of the folks we know and love and are in community with. We think of folks in our neighborhood or our family or our congregation. Many of us think of our congregation as a special and wonderful Beloved Community, and so many of our congregations are. Many find Unitarian Universalist congregations to be communities of like-minded folks where they feel beloved and where they love and care for each other. It is nice that we feel beloved in our churches, but I actually want to hold up a different use of the phrase, Beloved Community.

Beloved Community in this context is an idea made popular by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King back in the 60's. Philosopher-theologian, Josiah Royce, initially coined the term years earlier. He was founder of a movement called the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which King was a member of. Dr. King did not want Beloved Community to be confused with some impossible utopia, where the lion literally lays down with the lamb and all sadness is gone from the world. He was talking about something realistic and achievable. He was talking about what he truly believed could be achieved by a critical mass of people being trained in nonviolence and committed to a better world for all.

Dr. King imagined a world where all people on earth could more readily share the wealth and care. He imagined a beloved community as a world where hunger and homelessness would not be tolerated because they were seen as outside the standards of human decency. He looked for a world without racism, discrimination or bigotry. These would be replaced by the idea of the family of humanity. Communication would replace war in sorting out differences and love and trust would be stronger than fear and hate.

Dr. King didn't think there would be a world free of all conflict. He knew that conflict was part of life with humans. He did believe that conflict could be handled in a non-violent manner. King said, "The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, so that when the battle's over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor." And "I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end of that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community".

So as you can see from King's words, this Beloved Community he was talking about is bigger than just the wonderful Beloved Community here at your Fellowship, but is about the community of the wider world. It is not that these smaller Beloved Communities don't matter, but the goal is to make the whole world a place where respectful communication replaces violence and all people get their needs met.

I heard a speech at GA a couple of years ago by a respected and experienced minister named Fred Muir. He then published this material in an updated form in a new book. His piece is called, From iChurch to Beloved Community. And here is what he has to say to us, about what keeps Unitarian Universalism from being the force for good we can and should be in the world. What is it that keeps us from being leaders in the creation of King's version of Beloved Community?

First, Rev. Muir holds up the British Unitarians as an example. The Unitarians were well established in Britton long before coming to the USA. The British Unitarians have quite a bit in common with their relatives across the pond. Here is a statement from the British Unitarian web page. "Unitarianism is an open-minded and welcoming approach to faith that encourages individual freedom, equality for all and rational thought. There is no list of things that Unitarians must believe: instead we think everyone has the right to reach their own conclusions. We see

different opinions and lifestyles as valuable and enriching, and don't discriminate on grounds of gender age, race, religion or sexual orientation. Although Unitarianism has its roots in Jewish and Christian traditions it is open to insights from all faiths, science, the arts, the natural world and everyday living." Sounds just like us, doesn't it.

Rev. Fred Muir points out that the British Unitarians are in trouble. He says that the Unitarian Brits have about three generations left before their going to be all gone. Here are the numbers he sites. Half their churches have closed in the past 80 years. The big congregations are not much bigger than yours, like about 150 members, and the average size of a congregation in England is under 20 members. This despite the English churches having some really lovely buildings in many regions on the country.

The culprit of decline seems not to be money or love, but issues with Unitarian culture. And this Unitarian cultural that seems to be problematic over in England is also quite prevalent over here. Muir worries that, unless we make some changes, we could end up in the same downward spiral as the British Unitarians. He says that we are suffering, from ministers to members, from a trinity of errors that lead not only to our ineffectiveness but to the inability to effectively share our liberating message. He says these errors erode our vitality and relevance. They could well be our downfall. In describing these errors I will quote from Muir, using his words.

- First, we are being held back and stymied - really, we are being held captive - by a persistent, pervasive, disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times;
- Second, we cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news;
- Third, we refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future.

Individualism, exceptionalism, and issues around authority... That's us alright. It is true of a lot of us, in congregations all over the UUA. This is so not all we are as Unitarian Universalists, but I agree with Fred Muir that these three cultural traits are getting in the way of our thriving as a faith and getting in the way of us truly helping to create the kind of beloved community that King talked about. In fact I believe they sometimes actively undermine that work.

We come by these problematic traits honestly. We do come from a long line, and I mean a long line, of heretics. Early Unitarians in the 15 and 1600's were persecuted for their heretical and radical beliefs that Jesus was a spiritually gifted human being and not part of God. Some were burned at the stake. When you are under that kind of pressure, banding together against the others can be necessary for survival. But much later, when our faith was no longer dangerous to espouse, these traits were still fostered. Our wonderful and most famous of Unitarian ministers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, really fanned the flames of this Unitarian identity as being the church of the independent oddball's faith. He said things like "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature" and "Whose would be a man must be a nonconformist - nothings is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind". Many of those earlier Unitarian Transcendentalist thinkers, the hippies of the 19th century, were into "do your own thing" and were fighting against the Unitarian and American establishment of the times. And yet this all must be looked at in the context of the fact that, at that time, Unitarians were pretty much all well educated and wealthy white people of privilege. There was an old joke that the definition of a Unitarian was a Congregationalist with a Harvard education. So if you think about it, we come from radical heretics that evolved into the countercultural upper crust of New England. When the 1950's Fellowship movement began, it focused on calling upon those who wanted to form small and

independent liberal religious groups in university and scientific communities...well you can see the history that got us here.

But this is the situation I see us in today, as Unitarian Universalist. We are great folks with a great faith. Many of us were attracted to Unitarian Universalist congregations where we can feel like we have found our people. I know that is what happened to me. Those wonderful groups of "like minded liberals" who could band together to take shelter from the mainstream society dominated by more orthodox religious ideas. We like to gather in groups where folks listen to NPR and shop at the co-op.

It is great to find a place where we feel at home. But there can be a dark side to this sense of finding our unique people. We may believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but sometimes we think our worth and dignity is just a little more special than that of the Baptists or the Adventists. This is part of our problem with exceptionalism. I have heard many good UU folks say things like,... "I enjoy the Unitarian Church because this is where all the well educated people are." Really - my Lutheran brother the inorganic chemistry professor and my daughter's Catholic medical school professors must not count as well educated. Clearly Barack Obama. The Congregationalist, doesn't either. Yes, we have many scholars in our congregations and so do many other faiths. I wonder what it must sound like to other people when they hear us say things like that. How does it really reflect on us and our apparent respect for other people of other religions?

In terms of our individualism, it is great that we all feel valued for being ourselves and not just for how we fit into a mold made by others. This is a wonderful thing and I am so glad we raise our kids to love themselves as they are. I think it is great that we make decisions by the democratic process. Members have one vote each, no matter who they are and how much they donate. Individuality is a good thing, but not so much rampant individualism. What happens when our respect for the worth of each person becomes rampant individualism? When individualism is very highly valued, it is very hard to create and sustain institutions that serve common aspirations and the common good. This is especially true if there is any diversity of opinion in the group. I believe that is why consensus decision-making works well for Quakers, but not always so much for UUs. Quakers have for many, many generations being committed to the success of the whole congregation being more important than the needs or desires of any one individual. Making sure no single individual is ever disenfranchised in a decision keeps a UU group from being able to serve the common aspirations for the common good. At that point the beloved individual is more important than the beloved community.

And then there is the allergy to authority. Muir says, resistance to authority often results in the misuse of and abuse of power. If folks who distrust authority are asked to lead, their position can sometimes be used to prevent a group from moving forward in a cohesive direction rather being used to facilitate it. If a lot of time and energy is spent protecting each other from the leaders within the church, then the congregation is filled with suspicion and conflict. That is not healthy or pleasant. That is really not practicing beloved community. Muir says the misuse of power and authority is a factor in our inability and or unwillingness to welcome and listen to a diversity of interests and passions without being distracted and immobilized.

In reflecting on how our trinity of errors keeps us from bringing about King's version of Beloved Community, I got to thinking of something young people today refer to as "microaggression". This is a term used in anti-racism and anti-sexism circles for behaviors that are often not intended to be hurtful but are anyway. They are often subtle manifestations of underlying prejudice that we may not even be aware of. The study of microaggression began as an observation within the black community that when blatant racism is absent, small subtle insults can still be present and be very hurtful. This might be like when the one black student at school is expected to always be represent the "typical black person" in class discussions. Other

common examples of micro-aggression could be things like sexualized compliments to a young waitress, or assumptions that if someone has the last name of Gonzales that they must be a recent immigrant from Mexico. No, a microaggression is not the same kind of threat as the KKK burning a cross on your yard. But microaggressions can be hurtful and exhausting. Researches have found that folks who are exposed to a lot of microaggression can have increased anger, self doubt, and depression.

Here is my theory. I believe that our trinity of errors...individualism, exceptionalism, and allergy to authority... they perpetuate a stream of microaggressions that keep us from doing our best work in building the beloved community that King talked about. I believe they sometimes even keep us from being welcoming to new members. Let's say that you are someone who struggled in school for some reason. Perhaps you had a learning disability or perhaps family issues made school attendance difficult for you. Or perhaps you have a fine relationship with school but you have a child who is developmentally disabled. You hear that the UU church is a friendly and welcoming place so you go check it out. When you get there someone starts chatting about how much they like the uniquely intellectual nature of our services. That could hurt. That could feel like a microaggression. It sure might sound like you or your child are not the kind of people who are welcome here. And I will tell you - straight up - that there is nothing about the theology of "everyone is born good the first time" and "no one goes to hell" that needs a PhD to understand or appreciate. Or if someone who came out a faith based group that does really good justice work, like the Jesuit Volunteer Corp, and they come to a UU church where they hear how UUs are really committed to social justice, unlike those other churches...that is not going to feel good.

I also think about the issues around individualism and authority. When one of our leaders, either a religious professional or an elected lay leader, is trying to help the group build cohesion around a common goal and then help focus the resources of the church on meeting that goal and they hear - "Wait a minuet, I didn't agree to that" or some similar comment- that is a microaggression. It wears out the elected lay leaders. It makes good leaders shy away from taking positions where they could do good work.

This is particularly important for congregations like yours, who have grown from a small Family sized congregation to a bigger Pastoral Size congregation. Once a group gets bigger than about 50 folks, you can't always make everybody happy all the time and just go with the flow, like in Fellowship of 20 friends. You need to have policies and structures that allow everyone to give respectful input, and know what is expected and not expected of them, and allows leaders to do their job of leading the congregation for the common good. Good elected and professional leaders have an important role to play and we honor their work, just as we honor the work of other committed folks in the Fellowship.

Our congregations, where we love each other and feel connected in a special way, can be wonderful places. They can be places where we practice the skills of communication and non-violence that King talked about. They can be places of learning and healing. We can take the momentum and strength we gain in these small beloved communities and use it to build the bigger version of the Beloved Community of human kind. We can be part of building King's version of Beloved Community as an act of faith - living our UU values. But we can only do that if we are willing to give up our bad habits of individualism, exceptionalism, and fear of authority. They just fuel our microaggressions rather than enhancing our skills in non-violence. They will just hold us back and keep us insolated and separate from the greater family of humanity.

Now I share this with you today because I love our UU faith and I love our UU congregations. Strong and healthy congregations are a blessing to their members and a blessing to the world. I believe we are called to some great work, to build true Beloved Community here in Montana, all over this nation, and all over the world.