

“Beloved Community Requires Justice for All”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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“The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds of each to all.” So states the opening sentence of our reading this morning. The next sentence reminds us that when we encounter another and learn the “particulars” of our lives, a connectedness, a relationship, is discovered. It could seem from the title and these first two lines that the reading’s primary focus is on a congregation, any congregation, as a “religious community.” Here in our Fellowship, we get to know one another through sharing the particulars of our own lives. And as we do so, relationships are built which are based on caring and trust. In this way, we seek to make this Fellowship a beloved community where people respect and honor one another. We seek to create the kind of community that Starhawk referred to in our Chalice Lighting reading.

As the reading by Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed progresses the focus shifts. It shifts from the congregation to “a larger community.” When I first heard this reading while attending theological school, I was reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr’s comments on beloved community. It was only later that I learned the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed is a person of color and author of several books, including *The Selma Awakening* and *In Between: Memoir of an Integration Baby*. Morrison-Reed was very familiar with King’s perspective on the beloved community. When King talked about beloved community he wasn’t talking about a congregation, he was talking about a significantly larger community of people. He was talking about at least an entire nation of people and, quite possibly, all people. On December 3, 1956, King delivered an address titled “Facing the Challenge of a New Age” at the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change held in Montgomery, Alabama. Here is a quote from that address.

...we must remember as we boycott that a boycott is not an end within itself; it is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority. But 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 opposers 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.

It is clear from this quote that King’s idea of the beloved community extended far beyond the relationships or the walls of any congregation, any denomination or even any religious tradition. This sentiment is echoed in the reading we just heard in the following line, “The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done.” Like King, the Rev. Morrison-Reed is telling us here that we need community to see all that must be seen and to do all that must be done. There is a great deal that needs to be seen and done if there is any chance of the beloved community ever becoming a reality.

I say this with confidence because I am certain that what Rev. King wrote in his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” is absolutely correct. He wrote:

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. In other words, we are all one community. We are all part of the same garment of destiny. Whether we are a beloved community, a community that holds justice in high regard, or not, will determine the resilience of the garment we are all part and parcel of.

The resilience of the garment that holds us is being threatened today. It is being threatened from multiple directions. This morning I will speak to just a few of the significant threats that exist. Two of those threats are the COVID virus and global climate change. Both of these threats will require a larger and stronger sense of community, and a significantly greater commitment to community than currently exists, if they are

going to be addressed adequately. And both of these threats involve the matter of justice, or more accurately, injustice.

From what we currently know, it appears that the COVID pandemic had its origin in China. In late December of 2019 a cluster of pneumonia cases were reported in Wuhan Province. Those pneumonia cases are believed to represent the initial outbreak of the virus. In just a little more than 3 months the virus had traveled around the world. In March of last year the virus arrived in Montana. To me, this is a very clear example of the “inescapable network of mutuality” that King wrote about.

And yet some of our political leaders back then wasted time and diverted attention by blaming China for the disease instead of focusing all of our resources on stopping the spread of the virus. And some of those same political leaders pulled the U.S. out of the World Health Organization, often referred to as the WHO. Thankfully, the recent national election has resulted in a change in direction and policy related to the virus. I say thankfully because the policy of putting the people of this county at the head of the line and letting people of every other country fend for themselves would have allowed the virus to continue to spread and mutate. Such a policy would not have adequately or effectively protected the people in this country. And that policy was not just. The new policy and direction include important and beneficial steps to addressing the pandemic worldwide. Our nation has reaffirmed its involvement in the WHO. And when the WHO recently put out a call for the richest nations of the world to fund COVID vaccinations for the poorest nations, our current President responded. In the past month the US made a commitment to providing financial support that will make the vaccines available to people in some of the poorest countries in the world—countries where medical clinics may be few and far between. As we heard in our Story for All Ages this morning, people having access to needed medical care makes a world of difference in the lives of individuals and families. In the case of the current pandemic, having as many people as possible immunized will make a positive difference in the lives of people throughout the world including in this country.

The second significant threat I mentioned is global climate change. For decades there have been people in positions of power who have been discounting the science that tells us global climate change is real and is the result of our behavior. The science is clear and incontrovertible. Yet over the course of the last four years the President of this nation referred to climate change as a “hoax.” And he actively sought to dismantle all manner of efforts to address the causes of global climate change. He pulled us out of the Paris Agreement—an international treaty signed by the U.S. and 196 other countries around the world that seeks to address this crisis.

The issue of global climate change affirms, without a doubt, that we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. No matter what some politician asserts, there is no way for any nation to avoid the effects of a changing global climate. No matter how great a nation we might be or may some day become, if we continue to pump climate changing gases into our atmosphere, every person on this incredible planet we call home will suffer the consequences. The consequences are being seen around the world. They appear in many forms, not just increasing average temperatures. The consequences include wide fluctuations of temperatures, like those in Texas and surrounding states earlier this month—like intensifying droughts that occurred through the west this past summer—like more frequent and devastating major weather events such as hurricanes. The list could, and does, go on and on.

It is essential that as a nation we do our part to address this issue. Thankfully our nation has rejoined the Paris Agreement. And efforts are being made to get us back on track to meet the goals we committed to. But we fell behind over the past four years so there is catching up to be done. And beyond that, there are things the Paris Agreement didn’t include that will be required if we hope to avert a global catastrophe. One of the things that was missing was a commitment on the part of the wealthiest nations of the world to reduce their emissions of climate changing gases more rapidly and more dramatically than developing countries. Many developing countries don’t have the financial or technological resources to make the shift that is required. Making such a commitment would mean that we would need to reduce, or even eliminate, our reliance on fossil fuels. We would have to pay more, at least in the short run, for the energy we use. And we would need to become more conscious of how our lifestyle is negatively impacting the planet. The changes

that will be required will not be easy and will likely involve a level of discomfort. If you believe in science and what the climate scientists are telling us, the benefits of paying a higher price now far outweigh the cost that will come if we don't do everything we can, and all that will be required, to address this crisis.

Less than two weeks ago, Montana Interfaith Power and Light, an organization that UUFB is now a partner congregation of, took the step of adding its name to a letter to the President of the United States asking that the US do its fair share to address climate change. As the Board President of Montana Interfaith Power and Light, I had the responsibility and the honor of being the person to have Montana Interfaith Power and Light included as one of nearly 200 global advocacy groups who signed on. The letter requested that this country commit to "achieving the equivalent of a 195% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions below 2005 levels by 2030." This is a very ambitious goal. It is a goal that, if reached, could make a significant positive difference in addressing global climate change. And it is a goal that seeks to do what is fair, what is just.

We can all take steps to address these two issues. And when we do, we further the cause of justice and we take a step to building the beloved community—the beloved community of people the world over. Building beloved community is something that can't be done just through changing who is currently in political office or redoing the policies of our a nation. Building beloved community takes people like you and me making decisions and taking actions every day that will benefit people we have never met and may never meet. Building beloved community requires that we first become aware of the injustices that exist in our communities, our country and the world. It then requires that we take steps to address those injustices in whatever way we may be able.

As I approach the end of this sermon, I want to mention one more issue of injustice in this country that is currently getting attention at the state and national level. It is an issue that requires timely action on the part of all people who believe in justice for all. The issue involves people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer or LGBTQ for short. People who identify as LGBTQ are not protected from being discriminated against by any State of Montana or U.S. federal statute. Currently there are several bills being considered in the Montana legislature that would allow, or even require, discrimination of some people who identify as belonging to the LGBTQ community. These bills are not about justice, they are about prejudice and perpetuating prejudice. On the other hand, the U.S. House of Representatives just passed a bill referred to as the "Equality Act" that would prohibit discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation or gender identity. The Act would amend existing federal civil rights laws to extend protections for LGBTQ Americans. As a religious community that identifies ourselves as a "Welcoming Congregation," we assert that people who identify as LGBTQ deserve to be treated fairly and justly. Making the effort to get this piece of legislation enacted would be one step, a very important step for those who identify as LGBTQ, to building the beloved community. We have the ability to promote justice over prejudice by contacting our US Senators and asking them to vote yes when the Equality Act comes up. Any time and every time we promote justice over prejudice we help build the beloved community.

So may it be.