

October 16, 2022

"The Dream of Beloved Community"

By Rev. Ron Phares

Lotta had a remedy for a world come undone. She had a mission. We need her spirit. We need that focus on mission. There is so much pain on our planet right now, so much fear. Here too.

We can't - most of us - rescue the oppressed from the violence in Iran or Ukraine. We struggle to do so in our own neighborhoods. We often enough struggle to do so in our own hearts.

And then, on top of that, we're in a drought, right? And in that way there is a felt mirroring, or at least paralleling of our political state and our meteorological state and our congregational state. We need some rain. We need some relief. Some washing away and nurturing and softening of hard packed soil where no seed will flourish.

I don't know how to bring that to the world except to work toward it in our congregation. What is our healing rain? It is a dream. It is a dream popularized by the man who drew us into his own dream. Martin Luther King Jr. called it the beloved community. The beloved community. It will serve as the rain serves, to soothe, soften, cleanse, and rejuvenate.

But what is the beloved community? If you find yourself in UU circles, you'll hear about it all the time. What is it?

Well, according to King, the beloved community is a way of being, a way of seeing the world. That way of being is love, a particular kind of love. "The type of love that I stress here," said MLK, "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... It is...this type of love that can transform opposers into friends."

Not romance. Not friendship. But love as an essential orientation to the whole world such that

the world is experienced as the source and subject of the love that passes through you. Agape.

Agape is the ground of the beloved community. But for a tradition that yearns so vocally for the beloved community, you may notice that the word love occurs exactly zero times in our principles. We get close... dance around it... probably the nearest we get is our 8th Principle's declaration to dismantle systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions. I suppose that's a very long winded and Unitarian way of saying love.

So our hope for the beloved community can draw heavily on the agape of full inclusion and points to some of the work that lies upon that path. Agape is how we, as individuals, but more - as a church - can "transform opposers into friends," dismantle interior barriers, and bring about full inclusion. Agape is our north star.

I'm reminded of a time when to earn some merit badge or other, our scout leader gave us the task of getting back to camp after leading us into the wilderness at night. We tried to remember the way. We consulted and argued and it was all the leader could do to keep us together much less from going in the wrong direction. Finally, someone noticed the north star. Just like that, we found our orientation, agreed on our direction, and found our home.

I think that is why King's distinction between philia and agape is critically important. The beloved community needs a north star, an attractor, something beyond the community by which to orient.

This is a particular puzzle for us UU's. Other traditions orient toward doctrine, dogma, text, or their understanding of god. Our attractor is more pluralistic, perhaps. Our sense of mission more general, or more of an essence. But that our north star is more of a puzzle only makes it more important to attend to.

Covenant can serve this north star purpose well. Covenant articulates our intention and orients us to the essential and general. As I mentioned last

week, covenant as an expression of promised intention is a call that shapes our engagement with the world and with each other.

If we do not have that north star, that call, that intention that expresses our values, what's left is our relationships with each other. It is a common UU congregational puzzle because, in lieu of coherent theology, interpersonal relationships often become the backbone of congregational life.

And while friendship is absolutely necessary to bringing about the beloved community, it can not be our orienting attractor. If it is, we will never bring about the beloved community.

Did I say friendship was not important? (No.) Is it necessary? (Yes). But, if it is central, it forms a webwork that over time becomes difficult to penetrate. The shared past becomes a bulwark as it, rather than mission, forms the core of the community and repels those it hopes to attract. Further, when interpersonal relationship rather than value is the center, power is leveraged to status rather than mission.

So an interpersonal rationale for church hinders the emergence of agape because it is difficult to penetrate, impedes full inclusion, and is too easily corrupted by power dynamics brought to bear on those without status.

Conversely, centering values expressed as intention - like in a covenant - and reflecting those values in institutional processes makes for a less interpersonally contingent community, which somewhat ironically fosters love and inclusion. It also builds resilience, accountability, and forgiveness.

These values-expressed-as-intention, this orientation to something greater, should not be a confirmation, or at least not only a confirmation of who we are, but, more profoundly, a calling. Let us not be our own north star. That would risk feeling that we have achieved something that we have not achieved.

A north star orientation, a promised intention beyond ourselves, has the added benefit of a capacity to hold our mistakes. In fact, as a calling, it assumes we will make mistakes because we are not "there" yet. And this is really good. Because, I don't know about you but, mistakes, I've made a few.

I don't mean to. But I... and I imagine you... want to orient to something that assumes you've got work to do, knows that accountability is just a means of making amends.

You may wonder how I have the temerity to speak of such things at this time. But this is precisely the time. It is time to stop arguing, stop attacking. We all know how everyone here feels by now. Saying it again won't help. What will help is centering our core values instead of our conflict, finding our constellation.

Author, and academic Steven Hayes has found that simply shifting our attention from attacking our enemies to defining our core values can, "reduce physiological stress response, buffer the impact from negative judgements of others, reduce defensiveness, and help be more receptive to information that may be hard to accept." That sounds great! I'm going to give it a try. Maybe you will to. Living in a cycle of defensiveness and aggression is exhausting.

So then let's get on with it! Let's get on with the business of defining our core values, our North Star, our intention beyond community that fosters beloved community. If it is not constructive, it's time to set it aside. Now, while accountability feels destructive, it in fact is a necessary part of constructivity. And I am happy to be held accountable if I have misstepped or fostered some falsehood. I hope we all are.

That said, there are a number of constructive, really positive things emerging at NSUC. We're about to launch a Healthy Relations Team. Also, each of the upcoming months will feature a mid-week opportunity to come together around music and topical reflections, a sort of DIY vespers service facilitated by Kathryn Nicholson.

In November, the Fire Tenders small group ministry will get going. There we hope to develop a deep sense of reciprocal, personal relationship with the world through personal intention held in community and embodied by practices. It's gonna open your heart and blow your mind. Sign up sheets are in the stairwell and e-bulletin.

And of course, the board is conjuring an approach to the covenanting process.

The Beloved Community can be known by the qualities it demonstrates; goodwill, kindness, inclusion, & integrity. You'll know it by its laughter and tears, its ability to foster joy and hold anguish. It is born of agape, an essential orientation to love, and assumes love as the baseline of all engagement with the world and with each other.

The world needs all the beloved community it can get. The beloved community may be our only salvation. It is the rain that will soften the ground and nurture the seed, wash our hearts, and clear away that which obscures our sense of interdependence with all existence, not to mention each other. Come, walk in rain with me.