

Sermon Transcript

“Beloved Community”

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In his book, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Michael Eric Dyson recalls a sermon he heard at The Riverside Church. It wasn't James Forbes who was preaching, however. It was Charles Adams, Forbes' friend.

Halfway through the sermon, Charles Adams turns his attention to the Martin Luther King holiday, and the “forces that seek to twist King's memory and thwart his progressive agenda” (Dyson, 282). Adams went on: “Perhaps the easiest way to get rid of Martin Luther King, Jr. is to worship him. To honor him with a holiday that he never would have wanted. To celebrate his birth and his death, without committing ourselves to his vision and his love.”

“It is easier,” said Adams, “to praise a dead hero than to recognize and follow a living prophet” (Dyson, 283).

Dick Gilbert, a Unitarian Universalist minister and one of my teachers at Meadville Lombard, tells a story about a minister who preached at the church Franklin Delano Roosevelt attended when he was president. The minister received a phone call one Saturday and the caller asked, ‘Will the president be in church tomorrow?’

The preacher paused a moment, and said, ‘Well, I'm not sure, but we do expect God to be there, and I think that's sufficient reason for good attendance.’”

Dick Gilbert follows this story with something from Soren Kierkegaard. “Too often in their churches, people adopt an attitude of the theater, imagining that the preacher is an actor and they [the congregation] are his [or her] drama critics...”

Kierkegaard offers this corrective: “Actually, the people are the actors on the stage of life, and the preacher is merely the prompter, reminding the people of their lost lines.”

It is the Holy that is the critical audience¹.

At least that’s the hope.

It’s easier to hero worship and be a drama critic, which is perhaps why, generation after generation, prophets and sages remind us of our “lost lines.” Their ongoing effort suggests that we have the ability to know what matters in our living – the lines we have forgotten – but that we are often a willful, resistant people.

Today, let us listen to these living prophets, those whose vision might lead us to a world of peace and justice, to the “Beloved Community.” It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who popularized the term, “Beloved Community,” but he was not the first to use it. That distinction belongs to Josiah Royce, a late-nineteenth century Professor of Philosophy. Royce imagined the “Beloved Community” as an ideal, as a group of people who were fully dedicated to the cause of loyalty, truth and reality itself. Yet long before Royce and King spoke of “Beloved Community,” it has been a deep yearning in the human heart.

Perhaps an early version of the “Beloved Community” begins with Moses, the stuttering, reluctant leader of the Israelites, who leads them from slavery out of Egypt. As you remember, Moses has a “mountain top” experience with God, where he receives the Ten Commandments, as well as a vision of the “promised land” full of milk and honey.

Perhaps Moses comes down the mountain and says, “Well, the good news is we’ve got them down to ten...and this promised land sure sounds good,” but then he looks around and sees his people dancing around a golden calf and even questioning his leadership. It seems as if they’ve forgotten their lines, their sacred promises.

¹ <http://www.fusn.org/pages/sermons04-05/sermon112.html>

But Moses doesn't give up, and he leads on to the "Promised Land," traveling for 40 years in the desert. As he nears the end of his days, Moses stands atop a mountain next to the Promised Land, looking over, and he dies just short of the dream.

Jesus, as a subversive wisdom teacher, speaks and acts out of a "politics of compassion" and rallies against the great evil - "the politics of purity." As author Marcus Borg says, "The inclusive vision in Jesus' table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself. It was an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system... those rules and regulations that denied a person's worth and dignity, and continually harmed women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized" (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 56.)

In a society ordered by a strict purity system, separating the whole from the broken, the saved from the unsaved, the rich from the poor, Jesus' movement revealed a different social vision. With this new vision, Jesus sought to usher in the "Kingdom of God," a new socio-political reality in which everyone would sit at the welcome table.

Now, speaking of Moses and Jesus...

Have you heard the one about the burglar who breaks into a home and hears a soft voice saying, "Jesus is watching you?"

He thinks he's imagining it. But again the voice says "Jesus is watching you."

He turns his flashlight around and sees a parrot in a cage.

"Are you talking?" he asks.

"Yes," says the parrot.

"What's your name?" he says.

"Moses," the parrot says.

“What kind of crazy people name their parrot Moses?”

“The same kind of people who name their pit bull Jesus!”

If you’ll go with me on this, perhaps it’s fair to say that Jesus was a metaphorical pit bull, fighting for the politics of compassion.

Certainly Jesus’ life and ethics inspired Thomas Jefferson to create his own version of the Gospels, freed of the miracles, yet full of the wisdom from the great Teacher of Common Sense. No doubt inspired by this teacher, Jefferson wrote, in the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

These “self-evident truths” point to a Beloved Community waiting to happen.

The covenant of this country, the sacred promise of the Declaration of Independence, was reaffirmed by Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address. He reminded the Union that it was dedicated to the proposition that all people are “created equal and that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Without saying it, Lincoln takes us to the doorstep of the Beloved Community, lifting up the “lost lines” we must remember – if our grand experiment in democracy is to work.

There’s much missing in this loose exploration of the history beloved community...There’s wisdom from Eastern traditions and Native Peoples. The piece I don’t want to skip is the way in which women have drawn out the deeply relational aspects of the “Beloved Community.”

As Starhawk writes, “All is relationship. And we must make our relationships one of love; love of self and of others...and raging love against all that would diminish the unspeakable beauty of the world.” (Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*: 44.)

Sharon Welch writes, “The ‘beloved community’ names the matrix within life which is celebrated, love is worshipped, and partial victories over injustice lay the groundwork for further acts of criticism and courageous defiance.” (<http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/27#27>).

This web or “matrix of relationships” is fundamental to any sort of authentic “Beloved Community.” It is knowing that food grown here feeds families over there. Wars fought here pull on the web, here and here and here. This web of relationships invites us to consider the “WE” story.

In the book, *The Art of Possibility*, by Ben and Rosamund Zander, “The WE story points to relationships rather than individuals. It is the story of the unseen threads that connect us all, the story of possibility.”

“By telling the WE story, an individual becomes a conduit for this new inclusive entity, wearing its eyes and ears, feeling its heart, inquiring into what is best for *us*. If we describe revenge, greed, pride, fear, and self-righteousness as the villains – and people as the hope, than the enemy to conquer is never a human being...and the question that is continually asked is ‘What is best for *us*?’”

If you thought the earlier joke was out of place — and it might have been — imagine for a moment what would happen if a community said, “What is best for *us*?” and included in that question those who were criminals.

Let’s come back full circle to Josiah Royce, who coined the term “Beloved Community.” Central to his understanding of “Beloved Community” was the importance of lost causes. Every community hopes for the accomplishment of its central cause, and fulfillment is its goal, but Royce placed particular emphasis on the phenomenon of loyalty to a lost cause.

A lost cause, however, doesn’t mean a hopeless cause. Royce is talking about a cause that evokes our highest hopes and deepest moral commitments – and is open to critical review, but will not be fulfilled within the lifetime of the community.

As James Baldwin said after Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech, "That day, for a moment, it almost seemed that we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance; perhaps we could make the kingdom real, perhaps the beloved community would not forever remain that dream one dreamed in agony!" (James Baldwin, cited by Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: New American Library, 1982), p. 255.)

When Martin Luther King spoke of the Beloved Community, he spoke of it not as a "lost cause," but as an ideal to be realized and as a "realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence."

It was a global vision, in which poverty, hunger, and homelessness would not be tolerated because international standards would not allow it. King knew that conflict was a part of human nature, but he believed that conflict could be resolved by peaceful means, instead of personal violence, or military power. In the Beloved Community, love and trust would triumph over fear and hatred.

King understood himself as a Moses of sorts, leading his people toward the Promised Land, as he called his country to its highest ideals, found in the Declaration of Independence.

On the night before his assassination, on the eve of a protest march for striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, King said, "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." (April 3, 1968 speech.)

The next day, King was murdered, his life giving to the "lost cause" of Beloved Community.

This lost cause, this cause of resistance, non-violence, justice, and love, must be our inheritance...as hard, painful, and scary as it is. This church, if it is to realize its calling in the world, must be accountable to all those, here and outside its walls, who yearn for the "Beloved Community."

God knows we're not there yet. But this "lost cause" of Beloved Community – it is beginning to take root in the work of Unity's Anti-Racism team, the Restorative Justice Team, the Welcoming Congregation Team, and the other outreach ministries.

And I wonder what would happen if at every church meeting, the central question, no matter the agenda, was: "What is best for *us*?" and "*us*" included people of color, people who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, people of different class backgrounds, ages and abilities? What is best for *us*?

This "lost cause" asks us to do hard, risky, soul work...because anything less betrays the dream. As Marcus Borg says, imagine if Moses had chosen the easy route and gone into Egypt and said to the Hebrew slaves, "My children, your sins are forgiven."

They would properly have responded, "What? What does that have to do with us? Our problem isn't that we are sinners, you idiot. Our problem is that we are slaves, oppressed by Pharaoh!" (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 132).

The "lost cause" of Beloved Community, demands more than lip service for it to be realized. Today, as we remember and celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., may we let him and the all saints and prophets remind us of our "lost lines." And may we rededicate ourselves to the "lost causes" worthy of our very lives.

May it be so.