

Tending to Beloved Community: The Charge to Foster Loving Relationships

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January 20, 2002

Reading

From Martin Luther King Jr.'s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, December 10, 1964, Oslo, Norway:

I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind. I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the "isness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts him.

I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

I believe that even amid today's motor bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men.

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down, men other-centered can build up. ...

I still believe that we shall overcome.

Sermon

This month we have been talking about some of the skills that get discussed and passed on in seminaries, as a way of grappling on a practical basis with what it means if we take

seriously the *call to ministry*. And we are talking about them *together* as a way of grappling with what it means if we take seriously this *shared* call to ministry that we talk about having in this community.

Last week we talked about the call to be prophetic – to *forthtell* about what one sees in the world that is troubling or destructive, and then call others to see it also and to make an ethical choice to combat what it is we see happening. As part of that discussion, we mentioned the need to have such prophetic work grounded in communities like this one.

Today I want to talk a bit about community itself and the relationships that bind it together, and the ministry we are called to in tending to community.

Often, when we talk about community, we talk about it the way we talk about mom and apple pie. It is something good, we like it, but rarely do we talk about what it means to *make* good community. Even less do we teach what it takes from us to *nurture* strong communities. So often we talk about community as if it somehow springs up on its own, or doesn't, like wildflowers in the meadow. And if it isn't there, we simply mourn its absence instead of asking what our part in that might be.

Certainly there are times when community springs up all by itself. Just a look at New York after the disasters of this fall showed all kinds of spontaneous communities: The workers at Ground Zero. The wives and husbands who had lost their partners. The communities of people who rallied to care for others they didn't even know.

But most often, a tight, supportive, healthy community takes as much "work" as it does grace or luck. A long-time member of the Summit community told me the other day of her concern about that community. People are moving in, she said, because they love all the programs and the services. But when you ask them to serve, to lead one of the groups that make these programs and services happen, they refuse. "Do they think these things happen on their own?" she asked me rhetorically. Indeed, the worry was that the people who were drawn to a place by its strong sense of community, seeing no part for them in maintaining it, were in danger of losing the very thing that brought them.

Much of what makes a community a wonderful place to be takes tending and attention.

Take our community as an example – our coffee after service, the hymnals on your chairs, the sound system that allows you to hear what's said, the choir, the books you can peruse, the education for our children. All of these things happen because of the volunteers who make them happen. The miracle of every Sunday here is made possible by our shared commitment to this venture. So we know a lot about the disciplines of community and the shared responsibility to make it real and good. But there is more to the nurturing of this community that is less obvious than this, some of which we do naturally also, but all of which we should be talking about if we are to be good caretakers of this common venture.

Last week a member shared with me that he worried about our ability to hold together, what with encouraging everyone to their own prophetic witness and with the freedom each person is allowed to believe as reason and conscience demand. The center, he feared, would not hold as members were pulled in so many different directions.

It was an on-the-mark concern. It is a constant tension for all Unitarian Universalist communities to allow both this great latitude of belief and commitment, *and* still to make sure the center holds. And keeping this balance ties into this idea of the discipline of community.

Josiah Royce, the philosopher and theologian who coined the term "Beloved Community," said that communities were defined and held together by three things. The first was common memories. The second was a common hope. And the last was common practices.

What does his triad of attractive forces mean for us?

Well, in our case here, common memory means our history as Unitarian Universalists, and the history of this congregation. It means all those stories, events, those people's lives that speak to values that we call upon to bind us to common anchors and precedent. It means stories: for instance, of those who lived a commitment to truth and reason in the quest for understanding, and the right to conscience – even and especially in the religious quest. Stories like the one in this church's history of the minister in World War I who felt called to witness to pacifism, and whose congregants, even though they may not have agreed with him, stood behind his right to take such a stand. It means stories of lives whose generous spirits fought for the recognition of the worth and dignity of each and every person; who risked themselves to guarantee others what they themselves were accorded by their race or gender or other accident of birth. It means telling and retelling the stories that illustrate the values that bind us together and then being bound by that shared history.

The second piece of Royce's triad is the common hope that binds a people together. We heard a beautiful articulation of such a common hope in King's speech in Oslo. He articulated what we must – the dream towards which the community works, individually and collectively. And, like King, we must keep that vision always before us. He was a genius at keeping the common hope in front of his people as a rallying point. Ideally, our mission/vision statement would be such a hope articulated and our work together would be organized and animated around this dream.

Finally, Royce talks about the shared practices that hold us together. This could sound like the weakest of links, but it isn't. The things we do together do bind us together. For us this means the practice of worshiping together on a weekly basis. It means the lifespan religious education we engage in so that our beliefs are challenged and informed and always growing as we are. It means nights of fun we have when we celebrate this life we share together. It means the ways we support the church financially, and the shared

commitment to the giving of time and talent and treasure. These are some of the practices that bind us together.

There is one other. We may not talk about it all the time, and in that sense perhaps we take it for granted, but what we do here, in part, is to regularly surrender to the need to foster loving relationships among us.

It sounds so easy, doesn't it? We love each other. It sounds like the sentiment of any number of anemic greeting cards – sweet and cuddly and shallow. Or like the cartoon: "Love is ... sharing a soda with two straws." This is not what I am talking about. The kind of love we are called to foster and practice here is perhaps the toughest spiritual discipline of our lives.

The Greeks, of course, talked of three kinds of love – *eros* or erotic, physical love; *philia*, or the kind of love shared by friends; and *agape*, a self- forgetting love of the kind practiced by the gods. It is the latter that I am talking about today. *Agape* is the kind of love that sees the good, or the holy, in each other person. It is the kind of love that makes us love every other person as we love ourselves, and then to live out of that self- forgetting place.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Josiah Royce, who both talked about the "Beloved Community," saw it as the place where *agape* was the organizing principle. For them, that kind of animating center led to a few obvious places. For King in particular, it meant a call to end war, to end poverty, and to put an end to racism. If you truly loved others as yourself, King thought, you could tolerate none of this trinity of ills. Moreover, for King it meant that the means by which these things were achieved was nonviolent resistance and organizing, so that in the means to these ends there was also evidence of a commitment to *agape*.

What *agape* calls us to, we are still exploring. But the practice of self-fulfilling love stands before us always as our primary spiritual discipline in this community's life, just as it is in any ministry.

Practicing this kind of love isn't easy, as any of you know who have tried to practice it even in your own families. We hurt each other all the time. And we are prone to self-interest, maybe even hard-wired for it. But if life *together* is about *agape*, then we work at being interdependent, not simply independent, and when we are hurt, we pick ourselves up and work our hardest to stay in relationship. We try to stay open, to hear and speak the truth in love – not just speak the truth, but speak the truth *in love* – to offer and accept forgiveness, and to seek reconciliation *always* as our goal.

I was trying to think of some practical ways we could each work on cultivating *agape*. Almost all traditions have their reminders. C.S. Lewis, a Christian, asked his followers to walk down a city street, as an exercise, and say to themselves as they passed each person, "I see the Christ in you." In Thailand (so I believe it is a Buddhist practice), you greet

each person with hands in front of you, palms together, saying, "*Namaste*," which, loosely translated, means, "I salute the holy in you."

I thought also of a story I read – I cannot remember if it was Buddhist or Christian – about monks in a monastery. I'll modify slightly to make it more UU. As the story had it, there was a group of monks who lived in a monastery atop a mountain. At some point, their relations got very contentious. They began to be rude, ugly, dismissive and mean with each other. Then one day, there was a knock at the door, and when the door was opened, the monks found an old sage had come to visit. That night at dinner, he told them he had come because he had had a vision. In his vision, he saw that one of the monks of this monastery would be the new great sage and wise leader. Later that night, the old sage left the monastery and headed back down the mountain. Soon after he left, peace was restored at the monastery. Everyone treated each other with grace and kindness.

The reason for this restored peace was, of course, that every monk now looked at each of the others and wondered if that one, or maybe the other, might be the sage. They even wondered about the ones they disliked, and maybe saw some redeeming qualities that made them wonder. And of course, each monk wondered quietly to himself whether he also might not be the new wise and holy leader. When pettiness arose in himself, he must have thought, "Perhaps that character flaw is all that stands between me and the potential for great wisdom and holiness of which I am capable."

So I offer this story as a kind of practical tool for thinking about deepening our self-forgetting love. If we find ourselves struggling, we can remember the monks and ask ourselves, "Could *she* be the wise one? Could I?" Oftentimes we are surprised by what we find.

The word "religion" comes from the Latin, *religiare*, which means to bind together. Have any of you ever been asked if Unitarian Universalism does, in fact, qualify as a religion? Well, here's my answer: Even with our immense freedom to go in different directions of belief and prophetic calling, we UUs are bound together in ways that are very powerful. We are bound together by the shared memories of our forebears and the values on which they bet their lives. We are bound together by a shared hope for and commitment to a world that is more compassionate, just and equitable than the one in which we live. And this vision guides our work in the world. Finally, we are bound by community practices, not the least of which is a self-forgetting love that is at the heart of this place – that *is* its heart – and that is our greatest spiritual discipline.

Within this beloved community, may we always tend well to that which binds us together as part of the ministry to which we are each called.

Bless us all. I love you. Amen.

Closing Words

from Hosea Ballou:

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.

Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace [in this beloved community of faith].