

“The Beloved Community”

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Feeling alone is one of the hardest emotions in life, I think. I’ve felt alone and I’ve heard some of your stories of feeling alone . . . in times of grief and heartbreak as well as loneliness and isolation. And I also know that for many of you, the sense of community you find here at First Church Boston is *why* you show up.

If you are onsite this morning, how many times since you came through the front door have you been greeted with a word, a smile, a handshake or a hug? Hopefully more than once! And, for those of you online, we make it a point to wave hello to you in our time of greeting early in the service. And I know many of you take a moment to say ‘hello’ in the YouTube chat to one another.

Although we may vary in our degrees of introversion and extroversion, we all need some sense of being connected to other people. We all need some sense that we are not alone in this beautiful, big world. Some sense that we are part of a “we” . . . a community.

Community is a big term. A big idea. Sometimes, we talk about communities as a place. For example, depending on where you live you may identify as part of Boston, Somerville, or another neighborhood or city near or far. In this sense, community signals a geographic relationship to a particular place. But community is not always geographic.

When we say we long for more community or that we need to build or strengthen a community, we are often referring to a particular *quality* of connection to others. It’s not enough to simply be in a particular place with other people. To have a *feeling* of community, we need something that joins us together with intention or purpose. As the late 19th century philosopher Josiah Royce wrote,

“A crowd, whether it be a dangerous mob, or an amiably joyous gathering at a picnic is not a community. It has a mind, but no institutions, no organizations, no coherent unity, no history, no traditions.”

A community isn’t the same as a random group of people who happen to overlap in a given space or time. A community forms from connective bonds that tie people together in shared purpose, that create that sense of “we.” A community emerges from shared history, rituals, and/or traditions. A community has some kind of intentional structure, an

organized element. Community is not haphazard association; community is intentional relationships.

You may not be familiar with the name Josiah Royce, but you may have heard of his phrase “the beloved community.” Decades after Royce first wrote about the beloved community, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King popularized the phrase through his own speeches and writings. For King, the beloved community represented the end to which he sought to lead. In a 1966 article, King wrote:

“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.”
([King Center](#))

To use the language of our January monthly theme, we could say that Dr. King’s *quest* was to build beloved community. His ultimate vision was not focused on a goal of political or economic gain, rather he promoted and pursued a community of persons living in peace and justly sharing in the resources of this world. He envisioned a world governed by Love.

King described his vision as *agape* love—“a universal, all-embracing love for others for their sake.” ([King Center](#)) Rooted in a vision of abundant love for others, King’s dream was aptly named, the beloved—or the *be-loved*—community. It is a community bound together by the purpose of loving one another *for their sake*.

Royce emphasizes that the Beloved Community is not simply an ideal, but an active goal to which one orients one’s action and one’s life. He writes,

“Every proposed reform, every moral deed, is to be tested by whether and to what extent it contributes to the realization of the Beloved Community...When one cannot find the ‘beloved community,’ she needs to take steps to create it and if there is not evidence of the existence of such a community then the rule to live by is To Act So As To Hasten Its Coming.” ([Royce](#))

His urgency leaps off the page. Community was not a secondary luxury for Royce. Rather, he presumed community to be *essential* to who we are as humans. Writing after Nietzsche, Emerson, and other great advocates of the heroic power of the individual, Royce argued instead that communities come first. Who we are and what we do only emerges in a context of other people. Our purpose, our particular quest, exists only within a web of intersecting relationships with others. Individuals are never alone. Our very existence is connective and communal.

Given the reality of our communal existence, the central question becomes to what *kind* of community do we wish to belong? Communities can be gathered around all kinds of aims and purposes. They can have all manner of histories and institutions shaping their expectations and behaviors. One can be a very loyal member of either the Klu Klux Klan *or* of the NAACP. To which community will you pledge your loyalty? What kind of community will you help to strengthen and grow?

The vision of the Beloved Community is relevant not only because it is MLK weekend. The vision of the Beloved Community is critical because we are living within a moment where what *kind* of community we will be as a nation is being severely tested. Will we be a multi-ethnic, multi-religious community of citizens and immigrants ruled by law? Will we be a community committed to treating every human person with dignity and worthiness—or only those with the “right” color of skin, the “proper” documentation?

In this contest of differing visions for what kind of community we wish to build, communities of resistance arise and are strengthened. These communities of resistance envision a shared world that welcomes the immigrant, that embraces religious diversity, that pursues racial and gender justice, and that seeks to provide an adequate safety net for the most vulnerable in our society.

In this moment of increasing violence and vulnerability, we are facing urgent questions about the kinds of communities we would like to strengthen and which we would like to resist? To which communities will we be loyal?

Both Royce and King passionately argued that the Beloved Community—the good community—begins *now* by the choices we make. Both also spoke in ethical terms that engaged questions of politics and economics but identified the ultimate aim as something more. Building a beloved community is the vision to which politics, economics, and even religion should be directing their energies. The beloved community is our moral quest.

As a religious community, a similar vision of mutual love is in our institutional DNA. When our Puritan ancestors founded this church in 1630, they signed their names to a covenant promising to “walk in all our ways ... in mutual love and respect each to other.” For nearly 400 years, generation after generation of members of this church have sought to live into these promises of mutual love. Each generation is called to the work of love, to the work of building community, to sustaining a “we” that cares for us all.

Prioritizing community is *not* what our culture asks of us. There is much in American culture that would center the individual over the collective, the personal over the communal. Even here at First Church, I have often heard comments that celebrate

individuals following their particular passions—suggesting a culture that prioritizes individuals over what is in the best interest of the community. Rather than center individual interests, what would it look like here to have a clearer sense of our shared purpose? What would it mean to strengthen our collective identity, our institutional aims, our sense of “we”?

What does the Beloved Community look like? And how do we get there? In a sermon on community, it seems wrong for *my* voice to be the only one speaking. Community calls us into conversation with each other. So, I invite you to talk with each other about what a good community looks like and ideas for how we take steps to get there. Join the conversation after the service today about our purpose—either here in the Chapel or on Zoom (see the link in the e-news or chat).

Let us continue to dream about our visions of a good community. AND, let us take practical steps *To Act So As To Hasten Its Coming* in our lives as individuals, as members of this congregation, and as citizens of a particular town, state, and nation.

So may it be. Ashe. Amen.