

Beloved Community

Rev. Peggy Meeker, 11/12/17

Reading: a quote attributed to Max Warren, Irish Anglican vicar and missionary, in 1963:

“Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on [people]’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival. We have to try to sit where they sit, to enter sympathetically into the pains and grieves and joys of their history and see how those pains and griefs and joys have determined the premises of their argument. We have, in a word, to be ‘present’ with them.”

Beloved Community

What a week this has been here at church. As you know, our office administrator had to resign, and so we are looking to hire again. A handful of us tried to keep things going in the office, and we ran into so many obstacles it felt like a comedy of errors. I tried to get [name deleted] to come up here and tell you a little of what happened, but you know [name deleted], she’s shy. At one point she said her brains were fried, which isn’t good, but it was good to know she had more than one of them in there, to get us through. [Thanks given to all who helped out.] And anyone else who stepped in that I don’t know about, thank you! For me, it was a little taste of beloved community.

It’s also been an interesting week politically. In Virginia, Danica Roem, a Democrat and a transgender woman, became the first openly transgender person in the country to be elected to a state legislature. Roem’s opponent in the race was Robert Marshall, a 13-term incumbent who is known to have described himself as the state’s “chief homophobe.” The *New York Times* marked Roem’s victory with these words: “Ms. Roem will be just one state lawmaker out of more than 7,000 nationwide, but her victory resonated far beyond her legislative influence. Gay and lesbian Americans have made major strides in terms of both social acceptance and political

representation, but transgender Americans are still struggling for both. There are seven openly gay members of Congress—six in the House and one in the Senate—but no openly transgender members. Many antidiscrimination laws protect people on the basis of sexual orientation but not gender identity, and killings of transgender people are on the rise” [“Danica Roem Wins Virginia Race, Breaking a Barrier for Transgender People,” *New York Times*, 11/7/17]. Imagine the feelings, not just for Roem but for all our transgender sisters and brothers who have spent their lives knowing that their very being is detested by so many in our society—imagine what this victory means to them. A taste of beloved community, of what life might be, should be.

We are slowly getting there, with respect to transgender folks. On Wednesday, the same day I read the news about Danica Roem, the *Writer’s Almanac* included a piece about Mary Lyon, who founded Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in 1837. It was the first women’s college that had a solid financial endowment—thanks to Lyon’s fund-raising efforts—and that was able to accept students of modest means. The seminary later became Mount Holyoke College. It remains a college for women, and as the *Writer’s Almanac* put it, their definition of women “now includes transgender and nonbinary students” [<https://writersalmanac.org/episodes/20171108/>].

The *Writer’s Almanac* went on to say that Wednesday was also the birthday of Dorothy Day, who spent her life fighting for women’s rights, civil rights, and the poor and homeless. Day’s work led to the foundation of the Catholic Worker Movement, which combined direct aid with nonviolent civil disobedience to help the poor. The *Writer’s Almanac* quoted Day as having said “What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, the poor, of the destitute . . . we can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever-widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as our friend” [<https://writersalmanac.org/episodes/20171108/>]. All these are glimpses of beloved community.

As I was starting to think about this sermon on beloved community—a term we use to describe our hope for things to be as they ought to be—I was also thinking about something else I’d promised to look into this week: an issue often referred to as cultural appropriation. In our setting, in churches, it usually has to do with using music from traditions other than our own, and in particular, from minority traditions that have too often been treated with disrespect. The question is: how can we be respectful of the cultures from which some of our resources are drawn, and when respect has not generally been given to a culture—like the African-American culture—how do we help repair that breach? And the two concepts, Beloved Community and cultural appropriation, began to coalesce for me.

I had thought about selecting hymn #149, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” as our closing hymn today. How many of you are familiar with that hymn? It’s quite beautiful and stirring, but it speaks of a journey that is not *ours*. The words were written by James Weldon Johnson, an African-American poet and organizer for the NAACP, and the music was written by his brother. It was adopted as the official song of the NAACP, was very popular during the Civil Rights era, and today is often called the black national anthem. Listen to the words of the first two verses:

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

It ends with a prayer: “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, ..., keep us in the path ... May we forever stand. True to our God, true to our native land.” What a powerful story and faith. But not really ours. I’m not saying we should never sing this hymn, but that we must approach it as holy ground.

This hymn is about the struggle toward Beloved Community of a group of people that has been denied. In fact, Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted its words 50 years ago in his speech “Where Do We Go from Here?” [11th Annual SCLC Convention, August 1967]. “In spite of a decade of significant progress,” he said, “the Negro still lives in the basement of the Great Society.” He advocated fundamental changes to our economic system, toward a fairer distribution of wealth, and then he quoted the second verse of this hymn and said “Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us the courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we continue our forward stride toward the city of freedom.” Toward Beloved Community.

Now I want to bring one more element into this reflection, and that is a book by Unitarian Universalist minister Tom Owen-Towle titled *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation* [Skinner House Books, 2004]. Owen-Towle was among those who, fifty years ago, along with our own Richard Gilbert, answered Martin Luther King Jr’s call to come to Selma, Alabama to campaign for civil rights. Owen-Towle writes that King’s mission was clear: “The end ... is the creation of the Beloved Community.”

He explains that the term Beloved Community was coined a little over a hundred years ago by Josiah Royce, an American philosopher, who wrote that “the office of religion is to aim towards the creation on earth of the Beloved Community” [p. xi]. One of many ministers who used the term was the great Universalist Clarence Skinner, who wrote sometime in the 40s: “The

Beloved Community is not an organization of individuals seeking private and selfish security for their souls. It is a new adventure, a spontaneous fellowship of consecrated [individuals] seeking a new world” [xii]. But the term was popularized by King, and it became integral to the vision of the civil rights movement. In fact, for that reason, I felt the need to use the term with some caution and care, in keeping with the quote I read earlier: “Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes [metaphorically!], for the place we are approaching is holy.”

Owen-Towle goes on to discuss Beloved Community as an ideal that can only be approximated, a metaphor for a transcendent social order, something we can grasp only in part. But “the quest for it,” he writes, “transforms us in the here and now” [p. xii]. He names twelve practices by which a church community can move toward Beloved Community. I’m not going to read them all, but here are the first five: (1) Occupy Holy Ground; (2) Welcome All Souls; (3) Care for Your Own—we have a Caring Committee, but *all* of us participate in caring for one another; (4) Give Everyone a Voice; and (5) Encourage Unity Amidst Diversity—“out of many, one”; and then number (11) Keep Journeying—it’s a lifelong path.

What would a spiritual practice of Beloved Community look like? I haven’t talked much about what exactly spiritual practice is, but to me it’s something I can use on a regular basis to remind myself of that which I value deeply and want my life to reflect. Tom Owen-Towle says, number one, occupy holy ground. Max Warren says “Our first task in approaching another people ... [and why not any other person?] is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy.” So to create Beloved Community we must know and stand on holy ground. So you could create a mantra as a way to greet each new day: “May I approach other people as holy ground.” Or “May I see the holy in someone different from me.” Or you could come up with a way to look back on the day: “Did I notice holy ground today?” Or “Did I take my shoes off today when I should have?”

Beloved Community is a vision and a partial reality in which all people share in life’s gifts. I glimpsed it at General Assembly the summer before last. I had never experienced as much participation and leadership from people of color as I did that week, and it was purposefully

planned, and I remember thinking, “Wow, it feels so good that we are *all* here.” When we experience Beloved Community it embraces us and rejuvenates us. And always, it calls to us to bring it further into reality. May we go out from this place today ready to help create Beloved Community for all. Amen.