

## *MLK & the Beloved Community*

January 17, 2016

Rev. Paul Beckel

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

### **“There are no outsiders”**

The amazing aftermath of Birmingham, the sweeping Negro Revolution, revealed to people all over the land that there are no outsiders in all these fifty states of America. When a police dog buried his fangs in the ankle of a small child in Birmingham, he buried his fangs in the ankle of every American. The bell of man’s inhumanity to man does not toll for any one man. It tolls for you, for me, for all of us.

*Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

We sing the freedom songs today for the same reason  
the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage  
and the songs add hope to our determination that  
“We shall overcome, Black and white together,  
We shall overcome someday.”

*MLK*

In celebrating today the life and vision of Martin Luther King Jr—a vision for justice and compassion for people of every race, let’s begin by acknowledging, with humility, that this land is the traditional territory of the Lummi and Nooksack peoples, whose presence is imbued in these mountains, valleys, waterways, and shorelines.

And so we give thanks today for a multicultural society. And we recommit ourselves to honor and to nurture our interdependent relationships within this beloved community regardless of age, race, ability, class, gender expression, sexual orientation, or natural origin. And further, in recognition of our commitment to religious freedom, we recommit ourselves today to build a world in which neither religion, nor lack thereof, should interfere with anyone’s welcome and participation in society.

Our gathering song today is regarded by many as the African American national anthem:

### **GATHERING SONG**

*Lift Every Voice and Sing #149*

### **CHILDREN’S FOCUS**

“The Children’s Crusade” as told by Kate Rohde in *What if Nobody Forgave*.

Summary: Facing a lack of volunteers for a march in Birmingham, Martin Luther King, Jr. is at a loss until the children stand up and say, “We’ll do it.” The adult leaders are hesitant to accept the offer, but realize that the children are old enough to face discrimination, and old enough to want their freedom. Over several days, then, thousands of children, high school, and college

students face Bull Connor's police dogs, are beaten back by fire hoses, and are sent to jail. But photos of these oppressive measures eventually turn the tide of public opinion against racial segregation.

**CHILDREN'S BLESSING**                      *Standing on the Side of Love* #1014

**COMMISSIONING & THANKS**

Summary: We gratefully recognized three BUF members going off the Pastoral Care Team: Angela Langner, Ursula Zvilna, and Marty Villa-Lovoz. We reaffirmed our appreciation for remaining team members Carl Nyblade, Jan Krouskop, Jeff Packer, and Rev Barbara Gilday. And we commissioned three new team members: Rick Steele, Mary Jane Brunt, and Drew Betz.

The work of the BUF Pastoral Care Team is primarily companionship for the members and friends of this congregation through difficult times. When you are in trouble and afraid... when you are ill... or when a loved one has died and you are alone... when you have a difficult decision to make, and would like a reality check... the Pastoral Care Team members are available to call you to your best self; they will remind you of the sustaining principles and the sources of inspiration we celebrate in our Unitarian Universalist tradition; and if you're ever doubting it, they will reassure you that you are worthy of love and respect.

Of course this is work we *all* do together as Beloved Community. But the members of the Pastoral Care team are screened and trained in matters of confidentiality and boundaries, listening, grief, and loss. And, on a regular basis, we make a point to call attention to all that they offer, and to renew the congregation's endorsement of their ministry....

**REFLECTIONS**

Summary: Lew Phinney recounted the days of the first march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, involving over 100 UU ministers and the UUA Board. Then he contrasted the recent 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary march across the same bridge which, as a UUA Board member, he joyfully participated in. Lew left us with a pointed question: If called to that first march, would you have gone?

**UNISON READING**    #709

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.    —*from the Christian Scriptures, James 1*

**MEDITATION / SILENCE**

**CHOIR**    *When I See the Water Tumbling Down*

**REFLECTIONS**    Rev. Paul Beckel

Let's consider two images of community. Both lovely images, but quite different. First there's Starhawk, who says: "Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

*[Voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power!]* Community [Starhawk says] Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.”

Starhawk speaks of community as a safe place. But can a place be safe when it contains people we haven't even met? When people are milling about with ideas that differ from our own? This past week I began a pathways to membership class with 14 newcomers who wish to know what it takes and what it means to be a part of the BUF community. But how can this work? Isn't it true that if even one soul joins a group, or one soul leaves, that it becomes a different group? ...So it's no longer The Community that it was a moment ago?

Yes, that's true. We are no longer who we were yesterday. The more pertinent question, though, is are we still beloved community?

Even as we welcome the rambunctious adolescent? Yes! Even as we receive the one who jumps right in, acting like she owns the place? Yes! Even as we decipher the one who stands off to the side, wary, perhaps having been wounded before by community that just didn't work? Yes!

I'd like to say now to our newcomers: I hope you someday find a community like the one Starhawk describes. You might find it here at BUF. If so, it will probably be a relatively small group of people who will most literally hold you when you falter. But there will be many others who will be joining their strength with yours to do the work that needs to be done.

Starhawk's vision of community is idealistic, intimate, and relatively small in scale. Martin Luther King's vision of Beloved Community is equally hopeful, and radical, but it is simultaneously broader, and involves rigorous engagement. So, as much as I affirm Starhawk's vision, let's be clear: that's a vision of a community of like-minded people who have opted in. And, in my opinion, it dwells just a little too long on the benefit it can bring to the individual.”

Starhawk's vision is for “somewhere.” King's vision is for here and now—in our workplace and congregation, in our town, our watershed, our nation, and world. And its emphasis is on bettering the whole, of which each of us is a part.

As explained by The King Center, founded by Coretta Scott King,

*Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.*

But this is not something that shall come to be through wishful thinking. Ending oppression and eventually making equality a *universal* value—something that is as obvious as loving our own children—that's going to take vigorous engagement. And it may make us feel good to envision, but along the way we are also likely to feel outrage at the setbacks and disappointments.

In a community like this we will *not* always be among people that we know, or like, or even trust. Yet even within these settings, the high standards of King's vision can work miracles.

In such expansive communities we can't be sure that everyone is going to love us. But who is going to stop us from loving them?

Beloved community comes about not when everyone is perfect, but when a critical mass of people commit themselves to love and to respect and to seek reconciliation within their sphere of influence. When a critical mass of people are determined that everyone in the community shall be included, and given equal protection, whether they have earned it or not.

If you're thinking that all these communities of which you are a part are too large and too numerous...such that they are outside of your control...then you're right. They are outside of your control, but not outside of your influence.

Those committed to building Beloved Community see all beings as brothers and sisters. They are under no illusion that their good feelings and goodwill will eliminate conflict, but they are committed to learn and to practice what they have learned about conflict-resolution, and reconciliation.

And when they fail in these efforts, and when they lose hope, or forget to try, they face these failures and get up and try again.

King's notion of Beloved Community is so outlandish that it might be hard to take seriously—if he had not exemplified it in his own life and in the behaviors that he insisted upon in his wing of the civil rights movement.

Time and again when his own house was bombed, when his life and that of his family were threatened, he spoke with incredible passion, but he spoke with respect. It wasn't that his opponents had earned his respect. King addressed the facts and named the atrocities that were being committed. He addressed hypocrisy and subterfuge. But like his role model Jesus, he demonstrated his belief that even his enemies had inherent worth and dignity.

King told the protestors he was training: [paraphrase] I need people who are willing to give their spirit and their bodies to the cause. But not those looking to win. *I need people who are seeking justice and reconciliation, not victory.*

Those he was training in nonviolent resistance were required to sign a pledge that they would, among other things, observe the basic rules of courtesy toward all people, friend and foe alike.

And he acknowledged: Not all who volunteered could pass the strict tests for service as demonstrators. But, he said: "*there was much to be done, over and above the dramatic act of presenting one's body in the marches. There were errands to be run, phone calls to be made, typing, so many things. If a volunteer wasn't suited to march, he was utilized in one of a dozen other ways to help the cause.*"

There's an interesting tension, then, in his vision for beloved community. He made it clear: not everyone had the same capacity to be on the front lines. And yet, he said, "There are no outsiders."

"[Our] revolution, revealed to people all over the land that there are no outsiders.... When a police dog buried his fangs in the ankle of a small child in Birmingham, he buried his fangs in the ankle of every American. The bell of man's inhumanity to man does not toll for any one man. It tolls for you, for me, for all of us."

How can we embody that vision this week in the greater Bellingham community? As you stand in that grocery line this week you might be able to guess who would vote differently than you; and who doesn't vote at all. You might try to guess who holds religious views that are much stricter than your own, and who doesn't really give a rip about anything. Love them. You don't need to be annoyingly gregarious. Just love them. You don't have to like them, but love them in your heart.

You probably won't change them. But you will change yourself. And you will change that portion of the web of community which touches your own. If you love them, they will be your beloved community.

It is a privilege to be on this earth long enough to learn to love. It is a privilege to learn from heroic figures, and our neighbors, whose acts of courage, and quiet acts of compassion we witness.

So let us create beloved community here and in the larger community. Let us create it with small acts of kindness and quiet goodwill toward all those we encounter: the black and the white, the witty and the skittish; the dirty and the fastidious; the drunks and the punks and the prudes; the mentally ill and the ridiculously perfect; with the deserving and especially the undeserving (as if we could judge).

Peace and justice and social harmony and beloved community are not the types of things to be accomplished in one lifetime. These ideals must be re-invented, re-invigorated, and re-imagined from day to day, from life to life, from hand to hand, from heart to heart.

Beloved community is difficult and beautiful. It is powerful, and along the way filled with missteps, and opportunities for humble self-awareness. It's an ideal we choose to embody together in recognition that— all evidence to the contrary—we belong to one another.

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

**SENDING SONG**    *We Shall Overcome*    #169