

“The Beloved Community”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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As some of you know Sam Teitel, our Outreach Coordinator, is in search for a congregation to serve as their minister. This has me thinking about my own search three years ago. The search that ultimately led me *here* to become minister of this community.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with the ministerial search process, it begins with a committee from the congregation reviewing packets of information from interested ministers. Then, the search committee interviews ministers by phone or Skype. Having identified a short list of 3 or 4 ministers, the search committee spends a weekend with each *pre-candidate*, including watching them preach. After the search committee decides on one final *candidate*, this minister then spends a week with the full congregation—from Sunday to Sunday. Following the second Sunday service, the congregation votes whether or not to call the person to become their minister.

Honestly, it’s a bit grueling . . . for both the search committee and the minister! But it is a process that reflects some of the best of the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Rather than a top-down assignment of a minister, it’s a grassroots process. The search committee may do a lot of the heavy lifting, but they are selected by the congregation as their representatives. And, ultimately, it is the congregation as a whole who has the final vote in their choice of minister. We do it this way because we have what is known as *congregational* polity—meaning that the final responsibility and accountability for the congregation lies with the members of the community.

During my week of candidating with the full congregation, there were *multiple* events on different themes—most of which were held in the vestry, the large room below this sanctuary. For many of these events, I sat in a chair in a circle

of unknown faces. We didn't yet know one another and so we asked questions of one another, listening and learning about each other. Do you remember?

One of these events was about the theme of community. I asked you to define community, to consider what makes a community *religious*, and to describe what a good community looks like as well as your thoughts on how to build such a community.

Community is a big term. A big idea. We talk about communities as a place. For example, depending on where you live you may identify as part of the Wayland, Natick, Weston or other nearby community. In this sense, community signals a geographic relationship to a particular place. But community is not always geographic. At least, I don't think this is what we mean when we say we long for more community or that we need to build or strengthen a community. Community in this sense refers to a particular *quality* of connection to others. It's not enough to simply *be* in a place or in a group. To give us a sense of community, we need something that joins us together with intention or purpose.

As 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."*

Taking a cue from Royce, community isn't simply a gathering of people, community is a group of people joined by a coherent unity, a shared history and traditions, as well as a structure that organizes people into relationships. To have a community rather than merely a group, you need a purpose that links people together. 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](#))

Rather than the goal of political or economic gain, King’s ultimate goal was a community of persons living in peace, justly sharing in the resources of this world, and devoid of hate. Such a community manifested the fullness of what King described as *agape* love—“a universal, all-embracing love for others for their sake.” ([King Center](#)) Rooted in a vision of abundant love, King’s dream was aptly named, the Beloved—or the *Be-loved*—Community.

Royce speaks of the Beloved Community somewhat differently. Like King, 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. For Royce, community was not a secondary luxury one might find in life. Rather, his philosophical framework understood the existence of community to precede that of individuals. Writing after Nietzsche, Emerson, and other great advocates of the heroic power of the individual, Royce argued instead that communities come first. For an individual to have a sense of personal distinction and direction in life, she must be in relationship to other people who provide the context and the contrasting relief to her particular life story.

Who we are and what we do emerges only in a context of other people. We do not exist alone. We exist only in a webs of connections. We exist only in community.

Given this reality, the question becomes to what *kind* of community do we wish to belong? Communities can be gathered around all kinds of purposes and aims. 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. Communities differ. And so, the question is to which community will you pledge your loyalty? Which community will you help to strengthen and grow?

For Royce, the community to which all communities ought to aspire is the Beloved Community—a community whose members strive to “loyalty, truth and reality itself.” ([Stanford](#)). Or, as UU minister Joanna Fontaine Crawford describes, “[the beloved community] was the best of everyone, working for the best of all humanity, and encompassing all of humanity. It starts with a community loyally working toward that end, ever expanding.” ([Crawford](#)) In Royce’s vision, the beloved community starts small and starts now . . . expanding to include more and more of humanity.

The vision of the Beloved Community is relevant not only because it is MLK weekend. The vision of the Beloved Community is critical because later this week a new president will be inaugurated who threatens many communities of color, immigrant communities, Muslim communities, and arguably the national community.

Yet, in response to the vision President-Elect Trump has cast, communities of resistance have been created or strengthened. Communities of resistance that envision a shared world that welcomes the immigrant, that embraces religious diversity, that pursues racial justice, and that seeks to provide an adequate safety net for the most vulnerable in our society. As the landscape of communities shifts and changes, I believe we are facing urgent questions

about the kind of communities we would like to strengthen and which we would like to resist? To which communities will we be loyal?

Nearly three years ago, I sat before a group of you during candidating week and asked you what a *good* community looked like and what role First Parish might play in building such community.

These were my questions then. They are my questions today. Both Royce and King passionately argued that the Beloved Community—the good community—begins *now* by the choices we make. They also both spoke in ethical terms that engaged questions of politics and economics, but were not limited to these. So, building a good community is not just about which political party is in power or not. Building a good community is the vision to which politics, economics, and even religion should be directing their energies. The good community is the ultimate goal.

So what does this good community look like? And how do we get there? I'm sitting here again asking you. 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 let us take a few minutes now to talk with each other about what a good community looks like and ideas for how we take steps to get there.

First, I'll give everyone a minute to jot down some thoughts on the index cards provided in your pews. Then, I'll invite you to talk with your neighbors for a moment. Finally, I will call us back together.

[*after several minutes*] 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.
Amen.