

“Glimpsing the Sacred”

A Sermon by Alex Jensen

First Parish in Wayland

Sunday, March 21, 2021

(Singing.) We are living ‘neath the great big dipper / We are washed by the very same rain / We are swimming in this stream together / Some in power and some in pain. / We can worship this ground we walk on / Cherishing the beings that we live beside. / Loving spirits will live forever / We’re all swimming to the other side.¹

I first heard this song standing in a circle at one of Harvard Divinity School’s weekly choir rehearsals. Standing side by side with my peers of all sorts of backgrounds, musical abilities, beliefs, and faith traditions, the lyrics became embodied in this incredible circle of voices. This holy moment of music making gave us a glimpse at something far greater than just ourselves. As we sang, many of us were moved to tears by the gentle words and music. To this day, it remains one of my favorite moments in my time in divinity school, reflecting radical types of communities and spaces; spaces where I have felt that I was welcomed to bring my full self and that I truly belonged.

It also makes me realize just how much I miss things like singing together in church and the sacred moments we can create together when we’re in-person. More importantly though, moments like these point to something special that I know to be true of Unitarian Universalism and the kinds of spaces and communities we hope to create.

I suspect that I’m not alone in having glimpses like this one at something sacred and larger than myself. You, too, know moments like this one. Moments like singing together in a packed sanctuary on a Sunday, a singing with a swell and hum that reaches us at our core. Moments like standing in awe under a clear night sky, gazing up at the wide moon and the great expanse of stars overhead. Moments like holding the hand of a loved one who is dying, bearing witness to their sacred and special life as it enters into its final moments. Sometimes, we can even feel this in common, everyday moments like in slowing down to enjoy conversation with friends over a shared meal or a simple cup of coffee.

I believe these glimpse moments go beyond just glimpses at wonder and connection. Instead, these glimpses offer us a peek at what we hold so dear and sacred as Unitarian Universalists. *These are glimpses at the very power of life itself.* And, while we see a world out there that is so deeply hurting, there are still glimpses we have now at the Beloved Community that we so desperately dream to create.

In exploring March’s theme of “Empowerment,”² I want to speak to you today about these sacred glimpse moments. Some of you have already heard a lot about Beloved Community already. The concept of the Beloved Community is something I hold central to my ministry and calling. It’s also the subject of my Master’s work³ as I’m finishing up my final semester in Divinity School.

¹ Pat Humphries & Emma’s Revolution, “[Swimming to the Other Side](#)”.

² March’s monthly theme at First Parish in Wayland.

³ Alex Jensen, “Beloved Glimpses: A Unitarian Universalist Theology of the Beloved Community and Implications for Our Shared World,” Master’s Thesis, *Harvard Divinity School*, 2021.

What I find hard about language of “Beloved Community” is how it can be difficult to envision or even imagine. It might seem like this really abstract idea or something that is far beyond the reaches of our own imaginations. Some of us might look skeptically at Beloved Community, as something that doesn’t really seem practical or even achievable in our lifetime. Some of us might be wondering if the arc really does bend toward justice.⁴

Even so, I believe that the Beloved Community isn’t really this far-off concept that’s too difficult for us to understand. Instead, I believe these everyday sacred glimpses show us that the Beloved Community is actually real to us and present with us in the here and now. *Ultimately, this is at the heart of Unitarian Universalism and our theology—how it is we make meaning or what it is that we hold sacred.*

We believe the Beloved Community is more than just a goal of how life should and ought to be. It’s an experience we have available to us even now. These glimpses at the Beloved Community help to sustain us as we work faithfully and tirelessly against injustice and strive to make this world a better place.

However, even in the wake of this powerful, prophetic vision, we as a tradition are facing many growing pains. We’re still trying to sort out what it is that we believe about ourselves as a faith and who we are still yet becoming. Though many of us within Unitarian Universalism have heard of this idea of the Beloved Community, we’re not yet all on the same page. We’re trying to make sense of our history while also answering the calls to end white supremacy and racial injustice in ourselves and our institutions.

This has become clear in a report from the UUA’s Commission on Institutional Change, a committee that examines the structures of power and whiteness in Unitarian Universalism. You might remember Stephanie’s sermon on this report back in February. In their latest report, titled “Widening the Circle of Concern,” the Commission named the importance in these times of centering theology in our tradition.

In their words:

We need to articulate a theology... grounded in our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources of inspiration. Developing a shared theology that centers on helping to unearth, manifest, and point the way toward liberation...[is] for our collective flourishing. This theology will also call us to be accountable to the legacies of our past deeds and to work for an equitable future.⁵

In short, we have a deep need for a common faith and a better way of speaking about that shared faith. In speaking about the Beloved Community this morning, I want to offer this theology of glimpsing the sacred as a theology that answers this call. I believe that the Beloved Community is a thread that can unite each one of us across this beautiful faith, no matter how different our personal beliefs and spiritualities might be.

⁴ [Quote](#) by the Rev. Theodore Parker on “the arc of the moral universe”.

⁵ [“Widening the Circle of Concern,”](#) UUA Commission on Institutional Change.

We are at a pivotal moment in our movement where we are deciding who we want to become and how we are leading this faith into the future for years to come. We need a better way of saying what it is exactly that we believe. The Beloved Community, as both the world we are building and an experience we already know through these glimpses, is one way we might name the core theology of our faith.

Our reading from earlier, by the Rev. Jennifer Nordstrom in *Justice on Earth*, gives us a beautiful vision for what Beloved Community looks like.⁶ In her description of this community, she imagines a world in which we live in integrity with the Earth. She names that we don't take more than we need, and that we live in tune with nature's seasons and cycles. Likewise, we live in integrity with one another, where we have diverse and vibrant cultures that teach us about what it is to be human without prejudice or hierarchy. Free from violence or exploitation, we live in tune with the rhythms of our own hearts as we laugh and sing together, celebrating the sacred joys of living.

What I find so moving about this powerful vision is that it speaks to what we do in Unitarian Universalist communities. We covenant together to be spaces where we can bring our fullest selves, leaving no part of who we are behind or at the door. We strive to live in right relationship with one another and the world around us. We join our hearts together on life's journey to celebrate life in all of its trials and tribulations, as well as its joys and sorrows. We know what Beloved Community is because we first experienced what it means to belong. This is what is so special about belonging to a Unitarian Universalist community.

However, we also know that our communities aren't perfect. In contrast to this greater vision, we see just how far we have to go in order to get there. We recognize the many ways that White Supremacy continues to pervade our communities and groups. We long for multicultural communities that reflect this shared theology that we hold so dear; communities that are welcoming to Black, Indigenous People and People of Color. We hope for a greater acceptance and embrace of Queer and Trans people in our congregations as we ensure that no single person feels alone or left out.

We are growing to be better, and our faith teaches us that such vibrant, dynamic communities are possible. When we do this right in our communities, we make opportunities for holy encounters; for people to feel loved and accepted just as they are in all that they are. And what we also know is that doing this right in our communities takes intentionality and practice.

However, the Beloved Community isn't some new idea that's emerged in recent years. This vision is also something that comes from our Universalist roots as a faith. Our Universalist forbearers believed in a greater love that holds every single one of us. In their view, no person was outside of the bounds of this love. While historically they might call this greater love "God," our Universalist ancestors pointed to that very thing that Frederick Douglass—as a Humanist—named as glimpses of what he might call "God".⁷

⁶ The Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti and the Rev. Jennifer Nordstrom, *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment*, p. 164.

⁷ [Quote](#) from Frederick Douglass on "God".

For our Universalist ancestors, ultimately what mattered wasn't some sense of salvation in the afterlife, though universal salvation was a defining theology. Instead, they believed that Salvation mattered in this life. They held a faith that taught that though this world might be marked with pain, tragedy, and injustice, there is *Good News*. In the end, this world is still savable and worthy of saving.

Universalism tells us of a circle of love that embraces every single one of us, no matter who we are or where we are on life's journey. This widening circle also shows us just how much working toward justice and liberation in this life matters, especially as we work to care for those who are most at the margins. Our faith calls us to build a longer table, inviting those who are different from ourselves, to pull up a chair.

Returning again to the Commission's report, they write:

A Universalist theology of liberation in the present day centers our capacity to be sanctuaries of radical truth telling and abundant compassion so that the all-embracing love at the center of our tradition can serve to make all of us more whole.⁸

If we are serious about widening our welcome to others—and I believe that we are—we need to have a better way of sharing this faith's Good News of love and liberation. Imagine what might be possible for this faith if we truly choose to center this potent theology of radical welcome and inclusion!

In our Time For All Ages⁹ this morning from Laurie and Joel, we see the power in making beloved spaces where we're welcomed to be our fullest selves. For Kelp the unicorn, who thought his whole life that he was a narwhal, he found a community that saw him and loved him as he was. Kelp's community rallied to support him, and in the end, he learned what it meant to belong. Kelp experienced a glimpse moment of living in Beloved Community and right relationship.

Returning to that opening moment I shared with you—of singing in a circle of beloved friends, getting a glimpse at the Beloved Community to come through this sacred moment. There is so much power in these moments and spaces for connection that we can experience!

For myself, I was lucky; becoming a Unitarian Universalist in my teenage years saved my life. This faith would hold me in some of the most challenging moments of my life. I was lucky that I experienced a Unitarian Universalism that held me in all that I was. I was lucky that this powerful experience of Beloved Community would eventually call me to bring this to others in my ministry. It breaks my heart that there are still folks out there who aren't welcomed to experience our life-saving faith and theology. There are still some who don't feel that they belong, who are left wondering if we'll really make a space at the table for them to bring their fullest selves.

⁸ "[Widening the Circle of Concern](#)," UUA Commission on Institutional Change.

⁹ Jessie Sima, "[Not Quite Narwhal](#)," *Simon and Schuster*.

Our faith calls us to draw and extend this circle wider! I invite you to join me in cultivating this shared faith. our Good News can't afford to be locked up in empty words of welcome. Instead, we must do the work. We have a lifesaving faith and theology that needs to be shared out, now more than ever.

So this morning, I leave you with this blessing:

May this theology transform our hearts, minds, and spirits. May we be ready to pursue this great promise of the Beloved Community on the horizon. And when we are weary in the face of anguish, pain, and injustice, may these glimpse moments that we get at the world yet to come sustain us on the journey.

(Singing.) We can worship this ground we walk on / Cherishing the beings that we live beside. / Loving spirits will live forever / We're all swimming to the other side.

May it be so. Amen.