



Building the Beloved Community

Clay Nelson © 5 March 2017

I've been reflecting a lot recently on why, since the age of five, I've more often than not been in church on Sundays. Of course, for most of my adult life it has been my vocation. It paid the bills. But in my reflections I've wondered, if that was not the case, would I still find myself here almost every Sunday? What need does it fulfil?

When I was five, I didn't ask that question. My family went, so I went. I might have resisted going at eight or nine, but the priest had an arrangement with a local bakery to provide day-old Danish for morning tea. During my teenage years I didn't rebel because I liked being an acolyte at the services. It gave me a sense of purpose and recognition. At that time there was also an active youth group--a good place for a socially awkward boy to meet girls. Late in high school I finally went off church when I discovered the clergy weren't perfect. I know, what a shock. In college, I started going back to church. More correctly, I went to lots of churches to explore what else was out there besides the one I grew up in with its imperfect ministers. So, I went to church out of curiosity. In most of them I felt out of place because I didn't know their stories as a community of faith. They didn't meet my need for a place to belong. But there were some churches exploring new ways of being church. They were trying out contemporary, inclusive worship services, pushing for women's ordination, exploring liberation theology, challenging hierarchy, demanding civil rights, and resisting a war in Southeast Asia. For once, going to church didn't seem to be solely about meeting my needs.

It turned out I had a need to be part of a community that focused on the world outside the church's stained glass windows. The experience resonated with my intuitive understanding that a church was different from a club. A club could meet my need to belong, serve as a social outlet, and provide a community of like-minded individuals engaged in a common purpose, but a church ideally had an additional component. It existed for the benefit of its non-members.

That doesn't mean the members didn't matter, it meant that the church was not a building or institution or a repository of tradition, doctrine and dogma, it was the members themselves. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*. It means a community of people called out for a special purpose. Throughout the New Testament this is what church meant, not grand buildings, hymns, prayers, rituals, and priests and ministers in all their finery, but people acting for the benefit of "The Other" in society. For its first few centuries, that was "church". It was a subversive, revolutionary collection of people who identified with and acted on behalf of the poor, the sick, the bereaved, the widowed, the enslaved, the imprisoned, the persecuted, the foreigner and those people didn't have to be members to be served. The *ekklesia* wanted to turn the established power structure on its head. The least would be first. The first would be last. It was what they took away from Jesus' life and ministry. It should be noted that Jesus had

no intention of creating what we call church today. He simply wanted people to identify with and welcome “The Other”.

So, what happened to that radical *ekklesia*? They grew in such numbers that they became a threat to power. Power’s response was to make them part of the establishment. The church moved from the margins of society where they were blamed, persecuted and scorned along with “The Other” to a position of power shared with the state. Those on the margins were no longer their priority. Having power, prestige and control, I suppose, were preferable to being thrown to the lions.

The institutional church grew to such tremendous power that for centuries it even controlled the state, but science, over a 300-year period, pulled the dogmatic rug out from under the church and so removed the justification for their authority. More and more people came to the conclusion that the church didn’t meet any of their needs.

I would have probably come to the same conclusion, except for two things: new scholarship about the historical Jesus and modern Unitarianism.

The search for the historical Jesus jettisoned 2000 years of church dogma and doctrine to find the revolutionary, human Jesus who identified with “The Other” and challenged oppressors. It changed the narrative from what do you believe about Jesus to how do we follow in his radically kind and compassionate way.

In 1961 two religious traditions in America merged. The Unitarians and the Universalists. The Unitarians had a 500-year history that went back first to England and eventually to Hungary. Their Christian identity was rooted in religious tolerance and in challenging the orthodox view of Jesus being part of the Godhead. The Universalists were much younger, having developed in America in opposition to Calvinist ideas about the total depravity of humankind and that only the elect would be saved and go to heaven. When they merged they gave up worrying about the differing beliefs that had divided them. They chose instead to find common ground in the values they shared, what we now call the Seven Principles.

This merger took place at the height of the civil rights movement in the US. Five years earlier, after the Montgomery Bus Strike sparked by Rosa Park’s refusal to sit in the back of the bus, Dr Martin Luther King Jr had this to say about the movement: *“The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends... It is this love, which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”*

Unitarian Universalists were deeply involved in the movement. James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister, became nationally known as a martyr to the civil rights cause when he died on 11 March 1965, in Selma, Alabama, after being attacked by a group of white supremacists. So it was no surprise that Unitarians were early adopters of King’s vision of building a Beloved Community.

For Dr King, the Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony. Rather, The Beloved Community was for him a realistic,

achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

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. An all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood will replace racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict. It requires a love that dares to transgress cultural and tribal divisions.

Dr King borrowed the term "Beloved Community" from Josiah Royce, who coined it in the early 20th century to describe a way of being in the world grounded not in disappointment but in possibility. For Royce, Beloved Community is a spiritual practice of loyalty — the radical idea that love is a more powerful force for change than fear.

Royce was an American philosopher whose life's work was all about what was required to live a meaningful life in an era of tumultuous change not unlike today. In an age as fragmented and polarised as our own, Royce's understanding of Beloved Community as loyalty to realise authentic community's liberating. Royce understood Beloved Community to be the result of loyalty to the divine indwelling that equally graces all people.

This is not a sentimentalised notion. Royce's description of Beloved Community is one of total relatedness requiring courage, empathic presence, and perseverance.

A contemporary of Royce, Universalist social ethicist and theologian Clarence Skinner, interpreted Beloved Community as nothing less than the purpose of religious community: *"it is not an organisation of individuals; it is a new adventure of consecrated men and women seeking a new world... who forget themselves in their passion to find the common life where the good of all is the quest of each."*

Unitarian Universalists have decided to take seriously the need to build the Beloved Community in an initiative called "Be the Love." Parker Palmer, an educator who focuses on spirituality and social change, has observed that *"the people who plant the seeds of movements make a critical decision: they decide to live 'divided no more.' They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside. They decide to claim authentic self-hood and act it out."*

When we offered sanctuary to the Indian students we joined this movement. We claimed who we are and many of us found it to be a spiritually transforming experience. There is something joyful and exhilarating about being authentic to ourselves in our actions. Once on this road it is hard, if not impossible, to turn back.

I know for me building the Beloved Community is what keeps me coming to church. It is my passion, but it can be disheartening. Last week alone, four mosques in the US

were burned down and several Jewish cemeteries were desecrated. In a world where it has become fashionable to hate, to be the love the world needs seems too little, too late. But I take heart from a parable told by Pete Seeger:

“...One end of the seesaw is on the ground because it has a big basket half full of rocks in it. The other end of the seesaw is up in the air because it’s got a basket one-quarter full of sand. Some of us have teaspoons, and we are trying to fill it up. Most people are scoffing at us. They say, ‘People like you have been trying for thousands of years, but it is leaking out of that basket as fast as you are putting it in.’ Our answer is that we are getting more people with teaspoons every day. And we believe that one of these days or years — who knows — that basket of sand is going to be so full that you are going to see that whole seesaw going zoop! in the other direction.

“Then people are going to say, ‘How did it happen so suddenly?’

“And we answer, ‘Us and our little teaspoons over thousands of years.’”

That’s how you build the Beloved Community...one teaspoon of love at a time.