

“How Beloved a Community, Beloved?”

a sermon preached

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First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

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I’ve had a pretty charmed life, I think. I hope you have, too.

I have been fortunate to get arrested a few times. In 1985, I signed the Pledge of Resistance, declaring that I would join the tradition of Henry David Thoreau and disobey civil authorities in the event of an escalation of the United States war against Nicaragua. When President Ronald Reagan imposed an embargo on Nicaragua, thousands of United States citizens occupied federal buildings across the country and refused to leave. And so one by one we were arrested, herded into holding areas and then processed by the courts. Some of us refused to cooperate with our arrests, and went limp in the arms of federal officers. Others gave the names of Central American revolutionary heroes and leaders of the women’s, student’s, religious and labor movements. Some of us were mute.

I’m not as revolutionary as some of my friends, so I was unwilling to aggravate the federal officers who had to move me. So I stood, cooperated, allowed that, “I know you guys are just doing your job.” Still, I spoke to the men moving me and said that we were unwilling simply to let our President get off on crushing a people, their country and their self-determination. And I was herded into a small office in the basement of the JFK Federal Building in Boston.

There I would sit for a couple of hours with a small group, including Rev. Carter Heyward and Professor Howard Zinn. These were people I knew. We were all “professional activists,” each in our own way. Rev. Heyward was best known in religious circles and the women’s movement. I was an actor and singer on picket lines and at demonstrations and teach-ins and, of course, in our nationally touring political theater “Little Flags.”

But Professor Zinn was not only a big man on campus” at Boston University, but a giant in the social movements against war, and for the faculty and graduate students trying to organize at BU, and against racism in the broader society, and for a fuller appreciation of the fact that it is the little people who make history. “If United States history were to be told from the perspective of the ordinary citizen, we would all begin with Mother Jones,” he would say. “The history we need to know is not the presidents and the wars, but the people and the struggle for progress.”

I was saddened to learn that Professor Zinn died this week. This author of *A People’s History of the United States*, this activist educator at teach-ins against segregation and the war against Vietnam, this Beacon Press author whose memoir declared *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, this inspirer of thousands of students and millions of people willing to remake the myths we had been taught about our country, this inspiring friend, had died of a heart attack, and we are left to grieve and celebrate.

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I argued with a colleague, a couple of months ago, about our need to create the Beloved Community. “I think it is a little grand for us to imagine that that is our task, that any of our meetings of Unitarian Universalist ministers or that any UU congregations themselves are even the tiniest expressions of ‘The Beloved Community.’ I wish we were just willing to be honest with one another, to share the little intuitive truth we hold, to be humble about the human task we are about. Sure, ‘Beloved Community,’ a grand concern, may indeed be our aim. But it is such a distant aim, and the greatness we aspire to is so very far away; can’t we take a breath and just be?”

The notion of Beloved Community is an ideal notion, an ideal notion proposed by an idealist philosopher, the leading American proponent of absolute idealism, Josiah Royce (1855-1916). Royce, who received his Ph. D. from Johns Hopkins University, wrote in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the first World War. He held the view that all aspects of reality, including those we experience as disconnected or contradictory, are ultimately unified in the thought of a single all-encompassing consciousness. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) For Professor Royce, all aspects of reality are brought together in a unitary consciousness, an Absolute Knower, a consciousness that you and I have access to and to which we must show loyalty. Not loyalty only to the particulars of the opinions we hold or the groups we belong to, but loyalty to a larger knowing, an expansive truth, loyalty to what actually is, to what we discover.

This large task is too much for any individual. It requires a social knowledge that is vigorous, able to see beyond the peculiarities and particularities of one perspective. Social knowledge is available to us because of the existential reality that there is no individual—or rather, that everything we have and know as individuals is predicated on the fact that first there is a group, first there is a social system, first there are the many; then there are the few, the individual, the you and the I.

How different this is from what we know in our lives! Just about every inclination in this society is about the individual. We are individuals and—conveniently—we express our individuality through the myriad of purchases we make. Some of us buy Levi’s and some of us wear Raven’s jackets; some of us invest at Fidelity and some of us watch The Daily Show; we drive Priuses and drink Seattle’s Best, we prefer Rehoboth Beach and can’t wait for the iPad to be available. We carry this notion that we are individuals, first, and, remarkably, that is so conveniently coherent with a society that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century replaced an old-fashioned notion of citizenry with identity based on consumption. “What you are is what you buy,” we used to sing at Little Flagg Theater.

But biology tells us that we are not individuals first. No individual exists without a social group. In a basic and almost silly way, we know that no individual occurs without the coming together of male human and female human. But really, there is no individual without the family unit, without the kinship group, without the clan and the tribe. The social exists first, and the individual emerges.

It takes knowing. It takes growing in consciousness. It takes an expanding commitment of loyalty to the Absolute Knower, the awareness that we are all part of.

Now we do start in a less mature knowing. The neonate, the absolute newborn, knows that whenever she is hungry, the breast appears and her hunger is sated. Sometimes it requires a little crying, of course, but the undisputable truth is that the breast is a part of the neonate.

The child grows and learns that by throwing a tantrum, the others around him will respond.

Learns to claim, “mine,” learns to resist, “no!” All these emerging knowings develop the child’s awareness of both the individual that is emerging and group that already is. The group—and the experience of the child—creates the individual.

Near the end of *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, Royce wrote, “Human life taken merely as it flows, viewed merely as it passes by in time and is gone, is indeed a lost river of experience that plunges down the mountains of youth and sinks in the deserts of age. Its significance comes solely through its relations to the air and the ocean and the great deeps of universal experience. For by such poor figures I may, in passing, symbolize that really rational relation of our personal experience to universal conscious experience . . .” (Royce 1995 [1908], 179-80)

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy says, “Royce's ethic is rooted in his analysis of the conditions necessary for an individual life to be meaningful. It is not enough that one's actions merely conform to the strictures of conventional morality—a trained animal might well fulfill such minimal conditions of morality. To lead a morally significant life, one’s actions must express a self-consciously asserted will. They must contribute toward realizing a plan of life, a plan that is itself unified by some freely chosen aim. Such an aim and its corresponding plan of life could not easily be created by an individual out of the chaos of conflicting personal desires and impulses that we all encounter. Rather, such aims and plans are found already largely formed in social experience: we come to consciousness in a world that proffers countless well-defined causes and programs for their accomplishment. These programs extend through time and require the contributions of many individuals for their advancement.

“When one judges a cause to be worthwhile and freely embraces such a program, several momentous things happen. The individual’s will is focused and defined in terms of the shared cause. The individual becomes allied with a community of others who are also committed to the same cause. Finally, a morally significant commitment to the cause and to the community develops. This commitment is what Royce calls ‘loyalty.’ The moral life may be understood in terms of the multiple loyalties that a person exhibits.”

The community that allows the fullest expression of multiple loyalties—and thus reveals our commitment to the Absolute Knower (of which we are a part) and the Absolute Knowing (which is part of our socially derived, individual consciousness)—is the Beloved Community. My argument with colleagues about Beloved Community comes from my question, “Can we know that we are ‘beloved’?” Martin Luther King Jr. knew that it was the God who loves us that creates in the Christian the possibility of being people able to express love. King’s insistence that we are loved—first loved—sets

all things in motion. God loves us. That certainty allows us to act as if Love is a vital force that can undo our small mindedness. This can undo our commitment to things that are not true, like racial superiority or the “otherness” of the Vietnamese. One Love has the power both to order the Universe and also to change the hearts of those who use dogs to control children, who use the power of the gun and the lynching tree to control a large population. This absolute Love creates the possibility of individuals and groups to actions coherent with that Love, part of that Love, fully expressing that Love, if knowing only partly that Love.

My notion of our inability to be a Beloved Community is part of my skepticism about our knowing anything, really; the epistemological challenge of individuation; how much of my attempt to know anything is clouded by the delusion I bore as an infant that I was the center of the Universe; how incomplete is my evolution to a critical self-awareness that allows me to have the slightest sense that the Love that is at the heart of everything is in any way related to the deeply felt but morally insignificant feelings I have that I label “love.” Is this really love? Or am I deluded?

Or, rather, have I become profoundly committed, by my experience of life in society, to living a life of loyalty; loyalty to the group, I guess, but larger, a loyalty to the Absolute, the Infinite, living a life of loyalty to all that allows us, in this human project, to dream the self-evident best for ourselves and the world. Absolute loyalty to the truths of what is around us, among us, within us, leads us to the right intentions, the right decisions and, with the support of the group, to right actions. To the expansion of the Absolute Knower. To a fuller appreciation of the Love that is creating Beloved Community.

Dr. King warned us about community. We want to be drum majors, he said; we naturally want to be noticed, to lead the parade, to show people how special we are—and more importantly, to have people tell us how special we are. We want to be recognized as drum majors, and so we show off our medals: Ph.D’s, he says, and Nobel prizes, and fancy homes and impressive salaries.

But let’s not, he argues, let’s not. Let’s be noticed not for the exclusive clubs we belong to, but for the way we serve others. Let’s be noticed not for the fancy churches we attend, but for the myriad ways we engage others in struggle for justice; let’s be noticed not for the lofty places we stand, but for the way we walk on the ground, the common ground, with the sisters and brothers who are, with us, part of the people claimed by Love, part of the Beloved Community that the consciousness in each heart is building here on earth. Let’s be with our Drum Major Martin because we’ve learned to be servants of justice, equity and compassion in Baltimore and beyond.

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I stood in front of the judge, taking my turn after Rev. Heyward and Professor Zinn. “Do you solemnly swear,” the clerk began, and I interrupted. “Your honor, as a person of faith, I object to the use of the name of God in a public court of law.” “Will you affirm

that you will not lie?" he asked. "I will only tell the truth," I responded. Each of us had been accused of disobeying a federal officer and being a disorderly person. "Not guilty" I pleaded, and, along with 578 (or so) others, I was released on personal recognizance. A handful of people who would not give their names were hauled off to prison. When their determination and their cases began to attract notice, the District Attorney decided to let them go quietly. A few weeks later, we got notice that the charges were dropped in our cases.

The *Contra* war against Nicaragua continued, our agitation continued, one by one members of the Massachusetts Congressional delegation were convinced that the millions of dollars that were being spent each day on an open civil war in El Salvador and a covert war against Nicaragua were a waste of money and human potential.

Beyond being impressed with ourselves and our valor and the rightness of our opinions, we sat in little circles and told each other the stories of people. "Manuel," a pseudonym, who lived in disguise after paramilitaries executed his brother, and then let it be known that they got the wrong sibling. Sister Helen, who told the story of American nuns killed by military forces. Luis, the peasant who shared the meaning of conscription to fight other peasants, and the cruelty and inhumanity of it all. The governmental education minister who talked about plans for the future of children in Esteli. The North American Baptist minister who talked about direct aid to Bluefields. The musicians who shared the joy of jamming together with brothers and sisters in Central America who, with us, share an experience of that Infinite Mind, that Supreme Knower, that Universal Love that motivates us all. We told the stories, we learned the truth, we were loyal to each other and all the possibilities that might exist if we live rightly.

And we know.

And we act.

And we love.