

Martin Luther King

January 16, 2011
Rev. Mark Belletini

Welcome, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here

to worship on a rare sunny morning

amid the gray days of winter,

to lift up the wisdom born of vision and struggle,

to call ourselves to deeper questions

and to respond to those questions

with the full integrity and amen of our lives.

**And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection,
as best as we can name them now, or may learn them in days to come; that
we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in
words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill.**

The Sequence for the Day

So much beyond my control....

So much beyond my will....

I can say I'm tired of the gray clouds
obscuring the healing radiance of the sun.

My tiredness doesn't change a thing.

I cannot wave my hand and push the clouds away.

I cannot fold them up and save them for later.

What I can do is live each day
as if it's a gift, speak honestly,
love attentively, be accountable,
be merciful to self and others,
and be satisfied with the little things I can do.

So much beyond my control....

So much beyond my will....

I cannot heal my friends who are deadly sick
by saying "Be well."

I cannot get employers to hire my friends with
felonies on their record by being mad about it.

What I can do is live each day
as if it's a gift, speak honestly,
love attentively, be accountable,

be merciful to self and others,
and be satisfied with the little things I can do.
Love, there is so much beyond my control.
Bid my heart to open enough
to admit, without shame, that my power is limited.
Then bid it open up just a bit more,
so that the power I do have,
the power which most resembles you..
provides a deeper radiance and health in this silence.

silence

There is so much I cannot control.
But I can find ways to express my love and care,
which transcends issues of limits and loss.
May we each feel free here to call to mind and heart
the faces and names of those we love and miss,
or even speak their names softly in our common house.
May we make plans to call or write them if we can,
light a candle for them if we cannot,
that our worship be not confined to a Sunday morning,
but stretch out through our week of days.

naming

Control is not mine, but rejoicing *is* mine, and
celebration with the very great power of song.

The First Reading comes from web edition of the book *Search for the Beloved Community; The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Kenneth Smith/Ira Zepp 1974

In speaking about the possibility of actualizing the Beloved Community in history, King attempted to avoid what he called "a superficial optimism" upon the one hand, and "a crippling pessimism" on the other. He knew that the solution of social problems is a slow process. At the same time, he was confident that, through God's help and human effort, social progress could be made. He said,

Although our moral pilgrimage may never reach a destination point on earth, our never-ceasing strivings may bring us ever closer to the city of righteousness. And though the Kingdom of God may remain not yet as universal reality in history, in the present it may exist in such isolated forms as in judgment, in personal devotion, and in some group life. .
[*Struggle to Love* (Harper & Row, 1961). p. 64].

Thus, though acutely aware that the Beloved Community is "not yet," but in the future -- perhaps even the distant future -- Martin Luther King believed that it would eventually be actualized, and

already he saw approximations of it. That is why he worked unceasingly for the realization of his dream and never lost hope that "there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land." His hope was rooted in his faith in the power of God to achieve his purpose among humankind within history.

The Second Reading *consists of excerpts from two linked poems by the great poet Gwendolyn Brooks. The poems are the First and the Second Sermons on the Warpland, and they were written in 1968.*

Build now your church, my brothers, sisters. Build never with brick... nor with granite. Build with lithe love. With love like lion eyes. With love like morningrise.

This is the urgency: Live! The garbageman is as dignified as the diplomat. Big Bessie's feet hurt like nobody's business, but she stands...bigly...under the unruly scrutiny. It is lonesome. Yes. Nevertheless, live. Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.

Sermon

My dear friend Jane Rzepka (who preached in this pulpit 11 years ago) was awarded the Distinguished Service award last June, at our General Assembly. Only one such honor is awarded each year, so it's a singular recognition, and much respected across the Association.

Several people spoke during the luncheon that followed the award ceremony, including Bill Schulz, (who also just preached here a few months ago), and Denny Davidoff (who, when she was Moderator, preached here some ten years ago).

I was sitting next to Gail Guisenhainer, our minister in Ann Arbor (who herself preached here just two years ago...ours is a pretty well-filled pulpit!). When it was time for Jane to get up and respond to all of the accolades, Gail started to quietly count down, as if a rocket was going to go off. Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven...When she got to One, Jane said to those gathered to honor her: "Of course, this award is all about you."

"Right on time," Gail said to me. "Jane believes with all of her heart that it's not about her. It's never about her. It's about all those with whom she shares the world, friends and strangers both, all those with whom she relates day in, day out. Her Beloved Community. And she gets to that point faster than anyone else I know. Usually ten seconds or less."

I realized that when Gail said that, she was articulating with precise and witty language what I had noticed about Jane since I first met her 40 years ago, before she and I were ordained ministers, when she was "only" the fiancée of my best friend from high school.

No matter what happens to Jane, it's never about her. It's about the Beloved Community of which she is part.

Now Martin Luther King used that phrase...Beloved Community...a lot. He didn't invent it, mind you. It was first used by a Euro-American philosopher at Harvard University in 1913...Josiah Royce...and it was kind of a secularized form of the Christian concept of the Kingdom of God. But this great phrase was given an even broader meaning by the African American philosopher Alain Locke, the founder, and first chair, of the philosophy department at Harvard, in the 1920s. His view of the world as a possible "Beloved Community" was very inclusive indeed, and ambitious, especially for that era. He understood, as was made clear in the children's story this morning, that the needs and feelings of people of every culture around the world echo each other, even though their languages, styles, clothing, architecture and religions may be different. We all need to eat. We all need shelter. We all need work. We all need love. Locke felt that the struggling Soviet peasant on a collective farm, and the urban sophisticated Bostonian in an apartment had more basic things in common than not.

Royce's and Locke's phrase "Beloved Community" echoed loudly through American social writers all the way to Martin Luther King Jr. In fact, King used the phrase so much that our first reading came from an essay actually entitled "*Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King Jr.*" There, after quoting King himself talking about the more Christian concept of the Kingdom of God, the authors offer these remarkable words: *though acutely aware that the Beloved Community is "not yet," but in the future -- perhaps even the distant future -- Martin Luther King believed that it would eventually be actualized; and already he saw approximations of it. That is why he worked unceasingly for the realization of his dream and never lost hope that "there will be a great camp meeting in the promised land."*

This month, I've been exploring the concept of authority from different angles. This morning, I'd like to suggest that the highest authority in Martin Luther King's life was not his personal image of God, nor even the texts of the scriptures (he was after all, a liberal Protestant Christian minister), but was rooted in this whole idea of the *Not Yet*, the *Not Yet Beloved Community*. His daily decisions and judgments were ruled by his allegiance to that invisible concept of a not yet realized "camp meeting in the promised land."

These images *promised land*, *camp meeting*...are images he heard his father use frequently in the Baptist church in which he was raised... and they are indeed biblical. They are both rooted in the Exodus stories of the Torah, which, in the historic African American churches of his day, were the most appreciated and valued scriptures. Why? Because, dealing as they did with the whole idea of the Israelites leaving slavery in Egypt altogether, they dealt clearly with liberation for *a whole population*. Real *physical* liberation. Release from real economic and social slavery. The Exodus narratives dealt with food in the belly and justice in the community. No private pie in the sky when you die. That sad individualistic post-death idea of salvation forced its way into the center of evangelical Christianity around 1850. A couple of preachers on the tent circuit developed this whole strange notion of "receiving" Jesus Christ as one's "personal" savior, a notion not found any place in the scriptures. No, as an African American, King grew up in a Christian culture that was rooted firmly in the Exodus idea of liberation (another word for salvation) for the *whole* community. Thus, he naturally gravitated to Royce's and Locke's phrase "Beloved Community," as a way of naming this larger, more inclusive view.

But he was not naïve. He was clear it was not a *present* reality. He felt it was a *not-yet* reality. And he over and over again consulted the authority of that *not-yet* reality. What is it you want to do with your life? What's your next best decision? To save your own soul? To go to heaven? NO! Your next decision is to choose to do anything that helps to make the Beloved Community more real than our present communities...*without* resorting to violence. And, as you go about that work, always be quick to look through the lens of love when confronting anyone or anything. (These last sentences could be the sum of Dr. King's approach.)

Moreover, he felt that the dawn of the Beloved Community to come will not only reveal a day when men, women and children of many colors and backgrounds can live and work together. No, it's that (as the vision of Selma made clear) *but it's much more as well*. It's also a time when we can deliberately turn from the terrible violence of the wars of ideology... remember, King came out against the Vietnam War when it was not popular to do so. And the Beloved Community will be real when the workplace is fair too, and salaries are just, not divisive, and those who labor can proceed in honor and dignity through realms of cooperation and joint effort, not into landmine strewn battlegrounds of competition and class separatism. Remember the selections from Gwendolyn Brooks? She wrote: *The garbage-man is as dignified as the diplomat*. Nice phrase, great rhythm, but why did she write it?

The date of her poem was 1968. That will tell you something, I'd guess. It's the year King was shot in Memphis. And why was he there? Was he working on civil rights issues? No, not exactly. He had worked on civil rights issues years earlier in Memphis. War issues? No. On that particular day in April, he was in the middle of complex negotiations about a strike by sanitation workers who had been mistreated by management, partially along racial lines to be sure. (That's always in there somewhere, isn't it?) But Dr. King had been told about two horrible deaths caused by total disregard on the part of management for worker safety. And since he was concerned about every aspect of justice, he showed up in Memphis.

For King, you see, the Beloved Community was about everyone, no matter their color, their religion, their class... or even, I'd have to surmise, their sexual orientation. Remember, his chief strategist was a totally open gay man, Bayard Rustin, a man he stubbornly turned to as an advisor even after Adam Clayton Powell threatened to spread a rumor that the two of them were having an affair. No King's whole approach to the authority of not-yet Beloved Community is summarized in Gwendolyn Brook's great line...*the garbage-man is as dignified as the diplomat*. King was interested in a *whole* Beloved Community, not some new segregated community, with management and sanitation workers living in separate cities, with Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Unitarian Universalists each hiding out in their own walled-off circles, etc.

I mentioned Unitarian Universalists in that last line because Dr. King and his wife Coretta Scott King used to attend Unitarian and Universalist churches while he was in school in Boston. Many of my older colleagues knew him personally; one was even a roommate with him for a time. And he preached in our congregations now and then. He gave the WARE lecture at General Assembly one year, and was very attuned to liberal theology, writing in his dissertation about the Unitarian Universalist theologian, Henry Nelson Wieman. Although he appreciated Wieman's theology, King's view of God was far more personal than Wieman's more naturalist idea of God, and so he

and Coretta chose not to affiliate with us, although they kept many friends among our ministers right until the day of his death. In fact, he was scheduled to preach the Installation of my friend Farley up in Cleveland a bit later that April. Thus, for King, once he accepted the Christian church of his youth, the idea of the Beloved Community and the New Testament idea of the Kingdom, Empire or Domain of God could flow together, informing each other easier than they could have had he chosen to link himself to us.

Now the authority of the Not Yet, the authority of the Beloved Community over any life may seem like a faded idea to some of you. After all, there has been progress in many areas that claimed King's concern, no question. Some things have been realized, bit by bit. I admit that. But I also remember what our authors wrote about King's attitude toward progress:

In speaking about the possibility of actualizing the Beloved Community in history, King attempted to avoid what he called "a superficial optimism" upon the one hand, and "a crippling pessimism" on the other. He knew that the solution of social problems is a slow process.

Right. The "middle path," as Buddha might have said. Neither superficial optimism. Nor a crippling pessimism.

And yet, despite my own appreciation of a middle way between the two cynical extremes, and despite my understanding that the Beloved Community is in the future, I have to say that the present community in which I live still invites me daily to long deeply for an immanent dawn of King's long dreamed Beloved Community.

I don't know about you, but this is the community *I* live in. I live in a city where a man in a threadbare parka stands at the top of the Morse road freeway exit with signs telling me about his four hungry children and telling me that he is out of a job. I have no rational reason to think he's lying as he stands there shivering in the cold. So I long not for my community, but for the Not Yet, for the Beloved Community. I live in a community where a woman who talks to herself because of severe mental health problems drinks her steaming coffee in front of my local McDonald's, right near the metal box with newspapers in it headlining budget cuts for all social services and mental health agencies. So I long not for my community, but for a Beloved Community. I have a three friends who have a hard time finding work not just because of the economy, but because of prison records from their youthful years that stay with them permanently like some awful tattoo of a life sentence. Every sentence in our state is a life sentence, after all. So I long not for my community, but for a Beloved Community. I could go on, of course, but you get my point. The authority of the Not Yet, the authority of the Beloved Community, still addresses me and I find I too want to acknowledge its authority in my life. The poverty I see around me is real, the economic injustices I see around me are real, the issues around mental health are real. But my point is that I want to yield to the authority of something far more real than that. I want to yield to the more powerful authority of King's vision of the Not Yet in my life. I want to claim that vision of a Beloved Community which is, yes! MORE REAL than what I see with my eyes and hear with my ears. The man at the Morse exit, the woman at McDonalds, my jobless friends are all windows I can see through, windows that enable me to catch brief glimpses of that Not Yet world, windows in the whirlwind of the present order that enable me to see what could be.

And Gwendolyn Brooks reminds me to *Conduct (my) blooming in the noise and whip of that whirlwind*. The whirlwind of the present world in which I live. She's not saying that blossoming will be easy, because the realities of the present world are sharp, cruel for many, and often hurt. But I still feel that the Beloved Community holds more reality, more authority than even the harsh present world which wants us to bow to it as the final authority, and sacrifice each other to it. The Beloved Community is the one which is not about us as individuals, but about justice and equality for all as a community. As King put it, the Beloved Community is about love, not fear; about cooperation for the common good, not competition to get it all for oneself. But King also wrote, as quoted in the first reading:

*And though (it) may remain **not yet** as a universal reality in history, in the present it may exist in such isolated forms as in judgment, in personal devotion, and in some group life.*

In other words, the Beloved Community anticipates itself some isolated forms even in the present, whenever, like my friend Jane Rzepka, we rush, taking ten seconds or less, to point out that it's not all about me, it's not all about you, but it's about everyone. It's not all about the one, but the many. The community. Of which... Glory Be!.. there are *already anticipatory* examples here on the earth, says King. Even in some "*group life*," he says. Like even, in some cases, can I dare say it...? this church.

This is why Gwendolyn Brooks, who knew how much the word Love was important to King, and how the church was important to King, wrote, just after he died, this magnificent benediction to us all who often try to build Beloved Community here at this church and in the community that hold us:

Build now your church, my brothers, sisters. Build never with brick...nor with granite. Build with lithe love. With love like lion eyes. With love like morningrise. This is the urgency...Live!

Offering

Closing Affirmation by Martin Luther King Jr.

This is where we are.

Where do we go from here?

First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth. We must stand up amidst a system that still oppresses, and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. And this is what we must see as we move on.

Martin Luther King Jr., 1967

Singing

#1014 Standing on the Side of Love