

Beloved Community

Acts 2:41-47

Buckingham Church

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“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.” I love that Luke included the list of the kinds of people who stood listening to Peter preach his first great sermon on the day of Pentecost. About three thousand of these folks, we are told, were baptized, and formed a new kind of community, one characterized by prayer, learning, teaching, eating together, and radical, extravagant sharing. They were described as having “glad and generous hearts,” being full of love for one another. Their later actions showed love not only for each other, but for all with whom they came into contact. From the beginning, we see that they represented a wide variety of races, ethnicities, languages and backgrounds. They were, for sure, a Beloved Community.

It didn't last very long in this form, however. Church conflicts go back to the first Church in Jerusalem. Early on, there apparently emerged some inequities in how the poor of the community were being treated, and those inequities were based on national origin. Conflicts would arise over whether it was okay for those not of Jewish background to be part of the church, or what the role of women would be. Human beings, who need one another to survive as we have been so reminded this past year, seem to struggle with creating long lasting communities of love, equity and peace, and

we suffer because of it again and again. As W. H. Auden once wrote, "We must love one another or die."

The phrase "Beloved Community" does not come from the Bible, but from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Over and over again, he painted a vision of a community built on love and non-violence, on equity and peace. In Black History Month, we are reminded year after year how we have fallen short of both the vision of the early churches and of Dr. King in this country. In fact, if we move through this month and only celebrate the profound achievements of Black Americans without acknowledging the problems that have prevented the Beloved Community from being a reality, we will not be any closer to its realization. In Peter's speech to the crowd on Pentecost, he was not shy about proclaiming what was wrong with their society, saying "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!"

Next week we will move into the season of Lent. One traditional focus of Lent has been urging people to do what AA calls a "searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves!" Too often for Lent, that gets trivialized into people giving up chocolate because it makes them gain weight. But oh, my friends, the stakes are so much higher than that! What if we took some time this Lent to take a "searching and fearless moral inventory" of how and why we as individuals, as churches, as an American society continue to fall short of creating either the Beloved Community envisioned by Dr. King and many others, or even a nation where all people are considered created equal and endowed with the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I saw a terrific Ted Talk this week by a man named Eran Thompson. He talked about how he learned of King's vision as a

child when his grandmother read him the "I Have a Dream" speech. Thompson describes the Beloved Community as a place where "we don't assign a hierarchy to our differences. We see each other. We appreciate each other. We celebrate each other." The description of the first church in Jerusalem sounds like a place where that happened, at least in the beginning. "All who believed were together." They ate together, shared freely of their possessions, opened their hearts to learn from the disciples, who were uneducated men from the sticks for the most part. Soon enough, this and other early churches would "assign a hierarchy to their differences," though. They would stop seeing each other, appreciating each other, loving each other with the sheer abandon of those first Christians.

This Lent, I am committing to a searching and fearless look at how I in my life and work can so easily fall into assigning a hierarchy to the differences between me and other people, and not just in terms of race. Who in the world am I not appreciating? Who am I not celebrating because they seem different from me? How is the church doing the same thing, not just this church in particular but the Church. We do this in the hope that by acknowledging the problems we may open up the possibility of moving closer to that vision of both Pentecost and Dr. King. As Amanda Gordon said in her inauguration poem, "Because being American is more than a pride we inherit. It's the past we step into and how we repair it." The hope that this "nation isn't broken, but simply unfinished." And so it is with the Church.

The end goal is a community shaped by love. Not the kind of love that Hallmark sells for Valentine's Day, fun as that may be, but a bodacious, courageous, honest, awe-inspiring, world-changing love like the one that formed that first community in Jerusalem. That kind

of love, Dr. King wrote, "is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action...love seeking to preserve and create community...a willingness to go to any length to restore community. It doesn't stop at the first mile, but it goes the second mile....a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated." Part of "a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole." (from "An Experiment in Love," 1958).

Now there's a project not just for Black History Month, not just for Lent, but for the rest of our lives. Learning to love as Christ loved us. Learning how to be the Beloved Community. Amen.