

Mission #1: Beloved Community©
A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein
Sunday October 11, 2015

This is the first sermon in a series of four about your congregational mission statement, those words that we have been speaking in unison every Sunday morning this fall. Four sermons for the four phrases in the statement: beloved community, nurturing mind and spirit, fighting injustice and transforming the world with love. You did a lot of work together several years ago to craft this mission statement, this assertion of who you understand yourselves to be. Did you know when you wrote and voted on this statement that you were not choosing words that described some ideal or aspirational concept? Did you know you were creating a statement of identity? Your mission statement should describe you in the here and now—to yourselves, to guests, and to the larger community. Your mission statement is the tool that brings coherence to your life together in faith.

“Mission,” according to the *Healthy Congregation Handbook*, “is the expression of the church’s deep, abiding beliefs. Mission provides the major standard against which all the activities, services, programs, policies and decisions are evaluated. Mission is the preserver of congregational integrity. A major function of the leaders of the congregation is to be the creators and guardians of the mission.” So if your mission statement is all of that, it seems like it is worth exploring it together in a deep and abiding manner, as we will over four Sundays this month and next.

How many of you are currently attending the Healthy Congregations workshop, or have attended one in the past? (Show of hands) That is a good number of people. For all of you, this will sound very familiar. One of definitions of a healthy congregation is that it focuses on mission (rather

than getting along, the past, survival, the minister, or some other issue). One of my jobs, as your Developmental Minister, is to help you focus, or refocus, on your mission rather than any of those other distractions that may have held your attention as a group in the recent past.

So here goes. Mission part one: we are a Beloved Community. As I wrote all those years ago in *Belonging*, community is what everybody claims to want when they are looking for a church home. Of course it is. We human beings are, for the most part, social in nature. We are relational. We are interdependent. At every stage of human development, we are faced with the task of defining ourselves both as unique individuals and as parts of groups - from families to social clubs to congregations. You might say, if you were to look at human life through the lens of family systems theory, that we human beings are always about finding the balance between separateness and intimacy. A congregation is just one of the places where we get to work out that polarity.

A healthy congregation, or any healthy human community, helps us all to achieve that balance by being, itself, a well-defined, well-differentiated organization. Margaret Wheatley, specialist in organizational development, writes that we human beings “need to explore why we have come together.” And the theologian Martin Buber wrote, “The real essence of community is to be found in the fact – manifest or otherwise – that it has a center. The real beginning of a community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations: the circle is described by the radii, not by the points along the circumference.”

A community, then, is created any time people come together with some clear intention or purpose. Recall that last week in the sermon about sabbath and solitude we defined a spiritual practice as any practice that has

both intentionality and regularity. So creating and sustaining a healthy congregation is a spiritual practice. A spiritual practice we all share.

To be part of a community is to be in relationship with other people. That is the obvious. But it is also to be in relationship with the stated purpose of that group of people. In a free society such as ours there will be many different kinds of communities: social, civic, political, and of course religious. You are a religious community, and the aspect of your mission statement that makes it clear that your purpose is religious is the word beloved. I hope you know that when you chose that phrase for your mission you were borrowing from the work of Martin Luther King. And I mean King the theologian, not King the activist. The reason his legacy endures is not because he was a really good community organizer. It is because as a theologian, he so carefully and skillfully chose his words to communicate the intent of his followers.

The beloved community, in King's theology, is the end result of the practice of non-violent protest; it is a future vision, the very long-term fruit of his strategy. He knew that desegregation was only the first step: changing laws and practices and structures. Getting people registered to vote. Improving education. All of that was step one in his glorious scheme. Step two was true integration: changing hearts so that everybody who had been on both sides of the barricades could live together with a true understanding of the other. That is Beloved Community. It describes that new relationship between former oppressed and oppressor; a relationship based on equality, reconciliation, and the most radical love imaginable.

King saw the civil rights movement as a glimpse of the Beloved Community; a microcosm of what he wished for all of society. In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* King wrote, "As I stood with

them and saw white and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizers, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shop workers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I knew I was seeing a microcosm of the mankind of the future in this moment of luminous and genuine brotherhood.” In a sense, the early civil rights movement modelled what he hoped would be the ultimate result of his efforts. Could we too, who have chosen to describe ourselves as a Beloved Community, could we too be role models for that ultimate ideal?

I actually think it is our obligation. If we claim an identity as a Beloved Community, then we absolutely need to act like one. We need to be intentional about our inter-relatedness in the present. We need to be intentional about our relationships to those who came before us. Smith and Zepp, writing about King’s Beloved Community, said, “This was a way of affirming that reality is made up of structures that form an interrelated whole; in other words, that human beings are dependent upon each other. Whatever a person is or possesses he owes to others who have preceded him. As King wrote: "Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally ‘in the red.’ " Recognition of one’s indebtedness to past generations should inhibit the sense of self-sufficiency and promote awareness that personal growth cannot take place apart from meaningful relationships with other persons, that the "I" cannot attain fulfillment without the "Thou."

Two important points in that pithy quote. One is that King is referencing Martin Buber, whose reading we heard earlier. The I and Thou language is Buberian. The other point is that in order to be effective agents for change we need to recognize that we always, always stand on the shoulders of those who came before. And we owe them not only recognition and honor, but action! I saw an interview recently with Amelia Boynton

Robinson. At 104 years of age she had returned to Selma last year to walk once again over the Edmund Pettis Bridge, the same walk she had taken 50 years earlier. She was asked how she felt about people saying that hers were the shoulders they stood upon. Her reply: “Get off of my shoulders. The foundation has been laid, now it’s time for you to build on it and get to work.”

And that brings us to the final thing that we need to be intentional about if we are to model Beloved Community. The work of bringing about what King called the two pillars of such a community: social justice and economic justice. (We will return to those two pillars in the later sermons in this series.)

So we are a Beloved Community. Are we? Do we ask enough of ourselves and of each other to meet the standards King set out? Do we expect that our membership in this congregation will bring about a qualitative change in our souls? Do we provide the means to effect this change? Do we make it clear to each other that we are not here to be comfortable, not here to be like-minded? Do we mean it when we say that the when we measure ourselves against our mission statement the measure of success will not be satisfaction? You’ve heard me say this before: as a congregation we are not in the satisfaction business, we are in the transformation business. At least we ought to be in that business if we are truly a Beloved Community. More on this concept of qualitative change in the soul next week.

Do we further demand of ourselves – communally and individually – that we be instruments of change, bringing about a qualitative change in our lives and in the lives of those around us?

A Beloved Community is creative. It does not live in the past, it lives into the future. A Beloved Community is redemptive. It does not hold onto grudges, it engages in active and ongoing reconciliation both internally and externally. Read through the lens of an understanding of the true meaning of Beloved Community, the four phrases of your mission statement make perfect sense. Beloved Community. Nurturing mind and spirit. Fighting injustice. Transforming the world through love.

Back in 1957 King gave a speech that included these words. “Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies.”

You have chosen a challenging mission, worthy of the best in all of us. On our very best days, let it be an accurate description of our identity.