

The Beloved Community of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A Sermon by Betty Kornitzer
First Parish in Bedford, Unitarian Universalist
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Those of you who know me well won't be surprised to hear that this morning I'm going to talk with you about Love. I understand that it's not at all unusual for ministers to preach only one sermon, and, well, I guess that mine's on Love. And it looks like I'm in pretty good company. The Sermons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are a profound study in Love. Especially in his writings on Beloved Community, Dr. King teaches that Love is active, Love is strong, Love is urgent, Love is practical and Love is possible. Somehow, we humans keep on forgetting that, Love is possible. And so, with the powerful example of Dr. King's spirit, I want us to take into our hearts right now, his example that even against all odds, and in the face of bigotry, brutality, imprisonment and even unto death, Love is possible, in fact Love is our imperative.

Dr. King had a vision, he had a dream, and he called that dream "The Beloved Community."

Our first reading today is taken from Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963. It illustrates Dr. King's Dream of Beloved Community.

Before the amassed thousand's King's stirring voice proclaimed:

"I say to you my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true

meaning of its creed "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today..."

These are words that inspire the spirit towards the reality of Beloved Community. And, as we are so inspired, there is awakened within us a collective longing to be in right relation with our fellows, and to live by our most noble principles.

The second reading today is taken from our First Parish Mission Statement, it reads in part:

"The First Parish in Bedford is a community of individuals and families, adults and children, committed to independent spiritual paths and a shared religious journey. We recognize that growth occurs by listening and quiet reflection, through dialogue and action. Among our values are love, honesty, humility, individual responsibility and respect for mystery. These

values are essential to our understanding, appreciating and changing our lives. We want every aspect of our congregational life to express our values....”

The Statement goes on to say:

“Worship, meaning literally “to shape that which is of worth,” is the center of our congregational life. We gather together to shape meaning, to know reality and to nourish hope.”

May we embrace these goals this morning, may we gather here to shape meaning, to know reality and to nourish hope.

In working towards realizing the ideals expressed in our Mission Statement, we at First Parish work towards the creation of our own Beloved Community.

He had a Dream, my friends. Yes, The Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr. surely had a dream. And one of the amazing things about Great Dreams is that their luminous vitality. Dr. King’s dream was both great and challenging. It was animated with so much energy, so much courage and so much love that it survived the man. And so it is that today, thirty-three years after his assassination, we gather to honor the man and his extraordinary vision of Beloved Community.

Friends, let us prepare to be challenged together, and together, let us prepare to dream!

Before facing that challenge, let’s try to comprehend what Dr. King meant by the notion of Beloved Community. His was a global vision of justice and equality in which standards of human decency prevailed. In the Beloved Community, hunger, homelessness, bigotry and hatred would be overcome by a powerful ethos of sisterhood and brotherhood.

For Dr. King, The Beloved Community was a practical, attainable objective. It could be achieved through the practice of nonviolent resistance to injustice. Dr. King understood that submission to oppression was not the answer. He was a man of great courage and direct action, and was jailed twenty-nine times for acts of civil disobedience.

Dr. King learned about non-violent resistance from his study of Gandhi whom he said “resisted with love instead of hate.” King wrote:

“Nonviolence is the way of the strong man. It is not a method of stagnant passivity. True pacifism is a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love.”

As early as 1956, Dr. King spoke of his Dream of Beloved Community as the end objective of nonviolent protest. At a victory gathering following the Supreme Court decision desegregating the seats on Montgomery’s buses, Dr King said:

“The end (of nonviolent protest) 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 opposers into friends...It is this love that will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”

There you have it friends, there’s the wellspring of Dr. King’s great and challenging Dream, it is the spirit moved by love, powerful enough to produce miracles in the hearts of men. And that’s what we are talking about today; it is what we are still in need of: miracles in our hearts, nothing less will suffice.

In some form, we have each walked through the doors of First Parish to explore the meaning of our existence, and our relations

to one another. For when you strip away all the other *stuff*, these are our core questions. And no matter which direction you approach these questions from; relationships always seem to be central to the answers. Relationships are the building blocks of Beloved Community, without them Dr. King's Dream cannot exist.

Now, here comes that challenge that I mentioned a few minutes back...thought maybe I'd forgotten? Well, No, actually, I care about us all too much for that. So here we are together, we've walked through the doors of First Parish...Now, are we willing to exert the courage the energy, the strength, the humility and the Love necessary to grow towards being a truly Beloved Community? Can we take that challenge, can we dream that dream?

It starts within the human heart, which is sometimes closed and clouded by fear or pride, anger or hurt. Are we willing to dismantle the barricades that we have built to protect our hearts from hurt, and to open our hearts to the pain of others? It is a lot to ask, I know. But what is the alternative? Let's take a look:

In his book *I and Thou*, the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, describes the two-fold nature of human relationships: We either connect with another as a personal presence (the I-Thou connection) or as an object, (the I-It paradigm). What Buber is inferring, I think, is that we can encounter and be *affected* by the divine personal presence in and through another person (I-Thou), or we can merely treat the other as an object to be manipulated (I-It). It's a very graphic dichotomy. Do you want to be a Thou or an It? No contest there. But there is a catch, you have to open your heart first, and then... it's simple, you either choose to Love or not to Love. Simple, but not easy.

Dr King spoke about this kind of Love in a stirring 1957 Sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama. There, he said:

"The Greek language comes out with another word for Love it is the word agape....It is a love that seeks nothing in return . It is an overflowing Love, it's what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of men. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men not because they are likeable, but because God loves them...And you refuse to do anything that would defeat an individual because you have agape in your soul."

Even a church community like ours at First Parish is not immune to internal controversies and interpersonal conflicts. While Our Unison Affirmation states: "Love is the Spirit of This Church," sometimes it's more difficult to feel and to share this love than at other times. If we come to First Parish seeking meaning, and meaning is grounded in relationships, then this is the place to learn to heal and to grow. As I see it, we stand on the threshold of real opportunity. We can choose to learn about healthy conflict resolution, you've heard of it, the win/win resolution that's tough on the issues and gentle on the people. It works, I know, in my past life I was a mediator!

As we seek meaning together, I would ask us each to consider that in our world, and sometimes at First Parish, we over-value that which we experience with our physical senses and under-value what we know to be true in our hearts. Of late some of us have been embroiled in a controversy about our physical plant. Perhaps we need to be reminded that we have come here seeking meaning. True meaning does not dwell in things or buildings or anything tangible, it

resides in our hearts. And when we forget this basic truth, and lift up the tangible in importance, we often find it crashing to pieces at our feet. Is that because we have done what my Mother calls putting the accent on the wrong syllaaable? Have we forgotten to put Love first? Have we lost the agape in our souls?

I have come to believe that Love is not a feeling, it is a *decision*. We can choose to love by seeing things differently. The spirit of this church is our responsibility, each and every one of us. Are we going to choose to love today, or are we going to be weighed down by the burden of our hurts and resentments? Did you know that the word Re-Sentment means to Re-Feel, and it's an optional activity. Being hurt once, now that can ambush you out of nowhere, but to continue suffering with it over time, that's voluntary. We are each responsible for our own healing and for our own state of mind. Nobody can take that from us without our active participation. Believing this, I call on us to speak gently with one another, to listen with open hearts to each others' pain, and to cherish our collective peace of mind.

And so, mostly, friends, I believe that we must embrace love as an imperative, because with love, just about anything is possible. What did Dr. King call it? "a love that will bring about miracles in the hearts of men." And he knew whereof he spoke, for Dr. King, beaten, spat upon and imprisoned twenty-nine times, found enough Love in his heart to sustain his Great Dream. We at First Parish might best honor his dream today by striving towards the creation of Beloved Community, right here in our church on Bedford Common. Let us take that challenge together, let us dare to dream that dream.

Blessed be and Amen.