

“Creating and Sustaining the Beloved Community”

A Sermon by Scottie McIntyre Johnson

Delivered at Wildflower Church – August 23, 2009

“Where Everybody Knows Your Name”

By Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo

Making your way in the world today

Takes everything you've got.

Taking a break from all your worries

Sure would help a lot.

Wouldn't you like to get away?

Sometimes you want to go

Where everybody knows your name.

And they're always glad you came.

You wanna be where you can see

Our troubles are all the same.

You wanna be where everybody knows your name.

You wanna go where people know,

People are all the same,

You wanna go where everybody knows your name.

I always loved the theme song from “Cheers”. I didn’t like the program all that much, but I loved the song.

I’m not sure what it says about our society that the beloved community that show was about was a bar. And that it was a fictional bar, at that.

The place where millions of Americans “went” *religiously* every week -- where they knew the names of all the people and loved them and cared about them -- wasn’t real. It was just a stream of focused electrodes hitting on a flat screen at the end of a vacuum tube.

But that song -- it always got to me. “Making your way in the world today takes everything you’ve got.” “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name. And they’re always glad you came.”

(Sing) “You wanna go where people know our troubles are all the same. You wanna go where everybody knows your name.”

The Beloved Community.

The phrase “the beloved community” was made popular by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights struggle. Dr. King, of course, had something more substantive in mind than a comfortable neighborhood bar -- real or fictitious. The beloved community he envisioned was no less than his vision of the culmination of all his work for social justice and equality.

“The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community,” he said after the Montgomery bus boycott.

Like several other phrases made known to a wide audience by Dr. King, the use of the term “Beloved Community” was not original with him. Tom Owen-Towle, in his book, *Growing the Beloved Community*, says that the American philosopher, Josiah Royce, writing in the early 1900’s coined the phrase in his book, *The Problem of Christianity*. Royce wrote:

Since the office of religion is to aim towards the creation on earth of the Beloved Community, the future task of religion is the task of inventing and applying arts which shall win all over to unity, and which shall overcome their original hatefulness by the gracious love, not of mere individuality, but of communities.

Using this phrase to characterize our communities of faith seems to have caught on soon after this with both Unitarians and Universalists. Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes, who was very much a social activist in his ministry, renamed his congregation the “Community Church of New York”, to emphasize that, as he wrote, “the core of [this congregation’s] faith, as the purpose of its life, is “the Beloved Community””.

Holmes’ vision -- like Martin Luther King’s -- was of a Beloved Community extending beyond (quote) “any particular parish, society or nation to the very edges of the cosmos, welcoming all of God’s creatures into its compassionate embrace.” (Owen-Towle, p. xi)

And the *Universalist* minister, Clarence Skinner (for whom our denomination’s press, Skinner House Books, is named) wrote, “The Beloved Community is not an organization of individuals seeking private and selfish security for their souls. It is a new adventure, a spontaneous fellowship of consecrated men [and women] seeking a new world.” (Owen-Towle, p. xii)

The Beloved Community.

Now, you can get a feeling of being in community in a lot of different places, and most of those places probably do some good for people. Even a bar like “Cheers” -- or “Trophies” or “Scholz’s Biergarten”, is not intrinsically a bad place. Unless you have a problem with alcoholism or those empty calories are the primary cause of your beer gut, it’s not.

Your family, your neighborhood, perhaps, your work place or school, The Sierra Club, The Sunset Valley Farmers Market, the Lions Club, the League of Women Voters, the

Austin Cycling Association, AARP -- these are all communities. And fine communities. There's certainly nothing wrong with these groups, with these communities. Some of them are good and useful because they offer us relaxation and fun. Or the opportunity to be with people who have similar interests. Many of them do very good things for others, as well.

Until about twelve years or so ago, I had built my life around these sorts of communities, and I was doing just fine, thank you. I had plenty of places where everybody knew my name. The Austin College community, my circle of friends, a women's choir I sang with, the Sherman Community Players.

I had plenty of places where I felt like I was giving back, too. My job, my profession as a Montessori educator, was an admirable one, I believed. I knew that what I did for a living was important and helped to make the world a better place. I wasn't just a taker. I was a giver. I was a good person who was living a good life, and I felt fine about myself.

But then, after being away from it for almost twenty years, I re-discovered this faith - this Unitarian Universalist faith, and I got serious about it, and really, for the first time in my life, I became a part of a community that-- at its best -- offered a different level of depth - - and breadth -- from any I'd ever been a part of before.

The Beloved Community.

What is different about a church – in particular, what *must* be different about *our* church, our Unitarian Universalist churches -- that sets them apart from all these other sorts of communities?

Tom Owen-Towle's book, *Growing a Beloved Community*, is actually a how-to book for UU churches. Its subtitle is "Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation". The number one requirement for a healthy congregation he lists in his book is "Occupy Holy Ground".

"A church is not a social club, a hospital wing, a political action center, or even a spiritual refuge," he says. "Although all these disparate components are part of what a church is. Rather, healthy congregations are primarily sites for seeking and spreading the holy, however variously referenced by Unitarian Universalist [s]...."

Owen-Towle's *very definition* of a church is a "site [a place] for seeking the holy."

One of the subsets of systematic theology I'll be studying this fall when my seminary classes resume is "ecclesiology". Ecclesiology is the study of how churches work. *Ecclesia* is the Greek word for a regularly convoked assembly. In its religious use, it refers to people being 'called out' of their daily routines for a sacred purpose." (p. 1)

In the recent past, some Unitarians and subsequently some Unitarian Universalists shied away from religious language such as "holy" and "sacred". But, regardless of how unconventional our religious beliefs may be -- Owen-Towle says, and I completely agree

with him -- regardless of how unconventional our religious beliefs may be, we must acknowledge and celebrate that they are religious -- that those things “of worth” we consider in our worship services are sacred topics.

What is the purpose of our lives? Is there a greater purpose outside of our own wants and needs? Who are we in relation to (as Owen-Towle says) “the soil, the sky, the animals and plants, the deities and society”? How do we bring about justice and mercy in the world? These are sacred topics, and our Unitarian Universalist churches are places where we ponder them.

Now, I know that some of us, because of our own very real experiences and because of our observations of “excesses and abuses”, come to this religious community, this ecclesia, holding low opinions of organized religion.

But, if we are, indeed, to help create the Beloved Community on earth, we’ve got to get over that, and recognize and admit that, in our society, it is the church that is the institution entrusted with the job of discerning and transmitting those beliefs we consider holy. And despite what we say about creeds and doctrines, we Unitarian Universalists do hold sacred tenets in common, and our Unitarian Universalist churches are the places we consider them. What are some of those sacred beliefs?

That revelation is not sealed but that religious and spiritual truth is constantly being discovered; that humankind is essentially good; that we are all held in the grasp of a universal, albeit unfathomable, love; that we have the right to search freely and responsibly for truth and meaning and that our own consciences are the ultimate authority in religious matters; that we are obligated to extend justice and mercy to all living beings; that it is possible and that we must work for a peaceful and united world; that we are obligated to protect and preserve the planet for the good of future generations.

These are only some of the holy and sacred beliefs of our religion, and when we ponder them together in love and teach them to our children in humility, we are in the midst of the Beloved Community.

The Beloved Community.

A word to those people (who are probably not here) who say that they are “spiritual but not religious.”

UU minister Gary James says that people who believe in personal spirituality but not organized religion “would not say, ‘I believe in medicine but I do not believe in medical schools, hospitals and clinics’.” One of the hallmarks of our Unitarian Universalist faith, in fact, is that we are congregationalists – we believe that the way we can best nurture our own souls is in community.

The Beloved Community.

Another mark of this community, according to Owen-Towle, is that it is one that balances both outreach and inreach; that is, it supports a vibrant, vital external social action program -- reaching out into the wider community to do both justice work and charitable work -- and it takes care of its own members.

On one side of the balance sits social outreach. You have many members, I am sure, who through both your church directly and through other community agencies, are working to strengthen your congregation's presence for good outside these walls. Social justice and social service work and peacemaking *must* be a significant part of life of the Beloved Community within Unitarian Universalism - or we are both betraying the very foundations on which this historic church rests *and* failing to live up to our *present* day moral and ethical code - our Unitarian Universalist Principles.

On the other side of the scale is how we care for our own. This is the "everybody knows your name" part. Through the efforts of your Care Team and others in your congregation, I am quite sure you are making great progress at discovering the needs of your own members and acting to help meet those needs. Your Membership and Hospitality Committees, as well as all your Small Group Ministries and Religious Education programs, are all ways you are working to create the Beloved Community here at Wildflower.

But another part of taking care of our own, perhaps the most important part, is how we treat each other when we work together, when we discuss, when we disagree, when we decide, when we win in a congregational vote and when we lose. If we can always treat each other with respect and with kindness; if we are able to not take things personally and to assume good intentions; if we can forgive each other and ourselves for our very human failings -- we will know that we are held in the embrace of a Beloved Community, indeed. Your continuing work on crafting a Covenant of Right Relations for Wildflower is a very significant step toward this.

Human beings are not meant to be alone. One of my favorite readings in our hymnal by George Odell is a litany of the times we need one another: when we mourn and would be comforted; when we are in trouble and are afraid; when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again; when we would accomplish some great purpose and cannot do it alone; in the hour of success and in the hour of defeat; and when we come to die and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey. "All our lives we are in need," he says, "and others are in need of us." Where else will these needs be met, if not in church?

That is why the church, the Beloved Community, exists. It is why we must plant it and cultivate it and nurture it and grow it stronger and deeper and wider, here in South Austin and everywhere in the land, because "All our lives *we* are in need, and others are in need of us."

You already know this at Wildflower Church, and I have every confidence that this Wildflower garden you are planting here will bring forth blossoms for now and for

generations to come. And I am most honored and grateful to be here among you this morning in this Beloved Community of Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church in Austin, Texas, and grateful that we share this liberating faith of Unitarian Universalism.

The work you are doing here is sacred, my friends, and never doubt for a moment, that this – Wildflower UU Church -- is a holy place.