

Preparation for Beloved Community (Feb theme) – Stories of Difference

What is a beloved community? The idea, developed in the 19th-century by Josiah Royce, is usually associated with Dr. Martin Luther King. King envisioned beloved community as the transformational goal of the civil rights movement, a reconciliation of social justice through love. The concept is timely now, and UUs are being asked to consider an “8th principle.” This principle promotes “journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community.” It calls for actions to “dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

The proposed principle raises questions. Why focus on diversity instead of commonality? Why emphasize racism? How is dismantling oppression a journey toward “spiritual wholeness”?

To consider these questions, we can begin with our own experiences in communities – neighborhoods, work, social and political groups. Some communities may have provided us a sense of belonging and shared goals. In other communities, we may have felt excluded, or invisible, or unable to bring our authentic self. Or we may have seen such exclusions happen for others. We may have been part of communities that struggled with disagreements and disorganization or lack of common goals.

For many of us, joining a church was a decision to be a part of a community, and joining a covenant group was a further step. In our groups, we start with a covenant – an agreement about how we will interact with each other. We listen and we share stories. As we hear each other’s stories, people often say that they see each other and feel seen in a deep way: “we’re all sort of alike, but so different, too.”

Listening to these stories is listening to difference. Somehow, seeing difference helps us build trust. Seeing difference broadens and deepens our sense of what commonality and community might be.

It seems paradoxical to see difference in order to build community, but seeing difference is part of seeing other people’s full humanity. People sometimes say “I don’t see color” when they talk about interacting with people who look different from them – emphasizing commonality. Many current thinkers, however, suggest that is important to see differences – color, gender, culture, class, disability, other differences – and to pay attention to how these differences have impacted experience. Thus Black poet and scholar Claudia Rankine says, “If you don’t see color, you don’t see me.”

We need to hear not only the individual story but the “backstory,” the story behind the story. Backstory extends to color and class and gender, to circumstance and history. Situations like racism that have affected many generations need particular consideration because backstory is neighborhood, and barriers that a great-grandfather met in education, jobs, or housing. Backstory is social practices and institutions that we can begin to see as systemic structures of injustice – injustices that have shaped people’s lives.

The 8th principle may or may not be adopted. But attention to stories and backstories – including history and its systemic consequences – can enrich our principles of justice, equity, and compassion. Change begins by understanding our own cultural context and by paying attention to the different experiences of others. These are paths to spiritual growth and to societal transformation, a beloved community.

Some quotes to consider ...

Without community, there is no liberation ... but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. *Audre Lorde*

The end 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. *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Pluralism is required, not for its own sake, but for the sake of enlarging our moral vision. *Sharon Welch*

When you have a conflict, that means that there are truths that have to be addressed on each side of the conflict. And when you have a conflict, then it's an educational process to try to resolve the conflict.
Dolores Huerta

The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict avoidance. Members are extremely pleasant with one another and avoid all disagreement. *M. Scott Peck*

All of us are put in boxes by our family, by our religion, by our society, our moment in history, even our own bodies. Some people have the courage to break free. *Geena Rocero, transgender activist*

It's like everybody's sitting there and they have some kind of veil over their face, and they look at each other through this veil that makes them see each other through some stereotypical kind of viewpoint. If we're ever gonna collectively begin to grapple with the problems that we have collectively, we're gonna have to move back the veil. *Wilma Mankiller, first woman Cherokee chief*

Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.
bell hooks

Questions to Ponder

1. We all have multiple sources of identity. How do you see yourself in terms of various identities: color or race or ethnicity, gender, social class, interests, family, education or job ... How have your family history and various aspects of your identity contributed to your "backstory"?
2. Describe some prejudices or limitations of understanding that you might have grown up with and your personal efforts to counteract those impulses.
3. Have you ever encountered systemic injustice, a situation where a rule, law, tradition, or some way that society was organized had an effect on someone (yourself or another) because of their identity?
4. In covenant groups, we share experiences about "deep" subjects and build trust. Reflect on the ways that has happened in your group.
5. Have you experienced being part of a group in which people of a different race, ethnicity, gender, ability, or sexual orientation were being ignored or not respected? What did that feel like?
6. Have you experienced being part of a group where many different kinds of people worked together successfully? What contributed to that success?
7. If you were in a group with a person who expressed a bias that was abhorrent to you, what would you do – try to persuade them, shame them to the group, discuss, remain silent, leave the group ...?
8. What is your vision of how the United States can move towards a beloved community?

Words of the Day

Before the Gathering, reflect upon an experience where different people were in community. The Words of the Day phrase is "A time when I experienced a community that valued differences was ..."