

# Seeking the Beloved Community

[John 1:43-51]

K Karpen

January 15, 2006  
First Sunday After Epiphany  
Human Relations Sunday

[John 1:43-51, "Seeking the Beloved Community," K Karpen, January 15, 2006]

This morning I'd like to share with you a few thoughts on the topic "seeking the beloved community." The idea of the beloved community was an early theme of Martin Luther King; it was a theme he returned to again and again as he wrote and reflected on the goal of his life's work and the goal of the movement he helped start. It's easy to hear a phrase like "the beloved community" and imagine some naïve, utopian ideal.

Although Dr. King had something specific and practical in mind when he used that phrase, it's easy to hear "the beloved community" and imagine a circle of friendly-looking black, white, and Asian people holding hands and singing "We Shall Overcome" wearing wistful but serious smiles. It's easy to talk about the beloved community and fall into a nostalgic, sentimental reverie, remembering a time when it seemed as though something could be done about huge problems like economic inequity, racial injustice, segregated neighborhoods, towns, schools and careers.

You can speak of the beloved community, remembering that Dr. King first latched onto the phrase 50 years ago, following the success of the Montgomery bus boycott, but forgetting that he was still using the phrase 10 years later, in the middle of the discouraging Chicago civil rights campaign, an effort that laid to rest any naïve notion that racism was limited to the South or that economic & political inequality was not firmly entrenched in our theoretically equal and democratic society.

In the summer of 1966, Dr. King expressed things this way: "I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are the ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end or that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community." ("Christian Century," July 13, 1966)

How could a person as smart and as savvy as Dr. King have believed us capable of all that, after all he'd seen and all he'd been put through? How could he still be singing that song? Actually, today most of us have two common and contradictory reactions to Dr. King's ideals, and they are both based on an inaccurate, nostalgia, and they're both wrong. The first really is, "how could he have been so naïve as to think we'd get there?" And the second is, "Wow, I can't believe how much things have changed."

One thing we could probably all agree on is, whatever Dr. King had in mind for us when he spoke and wrote of the beloved community, we're not there yet. We're not there yet. One thing to bear in mind, though: Had he lived to see today, Dr. King would not have been terribly surprised. Martin King knew that creating the beloved community would take time. Lots of time. He was impatient for it; and he was realistic about it.

As we just read together,

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"There will be inevitable setbacks here and there...our dreams will be shattered, our ethereal hopes blasted...difficult and painful as it is, we must walk on with an audacious faith in the future...This is hope for the future, and with this faith we will be able to sing in some cosmic past tense, "We have overcome..."

"We shall overcome." That was a song Dr. King never got sick of singing, although it, too, can be seen as both gradualistic and as hopelessly naïve. But that's an old song. People have been singing that song a long time. Scholars trace that song back to the middle of the 1700's, during slavery days. The tune may have been picked up from the crews on the slave ships; the words were born in the hopeless hope of slavery. After slavery, it became a union song, sung by people whose dreams of justice and fairness seemed just as far off.

We do wrong, all of us, to stick it away in the closet thinking it some passing 1960's idea like Nehru shirts. That's a song that needs to be part of the soundtrack of any life that is lived in the hope of justice, any life that is full of audacious faith in a future, any life that clings to the promise of God in the flickering light of the gospel.

We shall overcome... Shall—that's a strong word. Not, we might overcome. There's hope there. Not even, we should overcome. That's a word of moral authority. Shall. That's a word of future reality known in the present. That's a faith word.

We shall overcome the obstacles that still stand between us, where we are, and the beloved community we plan to be. Martin King thought there were three things you need in order to make beloved community. First, you need everyone. The beloved community is an all-inclusive community. Dr. King always said he needed the white racist to be part of it as much as the freedom fighter. It's easy to make community with your friends—with people who think like you, act like you, talk like you, look like you & agree with you. The beloved community involves going beyond—reaching out to your enemies, difficult as that is.

So, second, the beloved community is going to include conflict. Wherever you have different people and different ideas, you'll have conflict. The ideal of the beloved community is not one devoid of conflict, but rather one where conflict happens in a spirit of openness and peace. That is the non-violent ethic so close to Dr. King's heart.

And so, third, the beloved community requires reconciliation in a spirit of love. We love the word reconciliation in the church. We talk about radical reconciliation. We talk about interfaith reconciliation. We talk about reconciliation with our gay and lesbian friends & neighbors & brothers & sisters who have been hurt by the misguided coldness of the church.

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We name ourselves here a reconciling congregation! Let me let you in on some disturbing news. I don't know exactly how to tell you this: You don't have reconciliation with your friends...with people who agree with you and think like you. You have reconciliation with your enemies.

An inclusive, conflicted, reconciling community powered by love. That's what King yearned for. Was that so much to ask? Maybe. Was it naïve? Maybe.

Next week I want to share with you what I think this particular community might be like if we were to take Dr. King's ideal to heart. If we were to seek beloved community here at the crossroads of the world, 86<sup>th</sup> Street & West End Avenue.

For now I want to leave you singing, with that audacious and yes, maybe naïve hope. We shall overcome.