



What do we mean by Beloved Community?

SESSION ONE

By the Rev. Marcus George Halley

This talk can be accompanied by this powerpoint presentation, created by the Revs. Marcus Halley and Susan Daughtry. You're welcome to use it in your faith community! Find more at www.creatingbelovedcommunity.org

A little over ten years ago, I found myself at a really scary moment in my journey with God. It was so scary at the time that I was convinced that God wasn't actually there. You see, earlier that week, I had just been kicked out of my childhood church for speaking up in support of LGBTQ+ folks. I hadn't yet gained the confidence to step fully into my own identity as a gay man, but that didn't stop the doors of the church from closing in my face.

As grace would have it, though, earlier that summer I had heard rumblings of something called "the Episcopal Church" and "General Convention." When I stumbled onto a website, I heard Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori talking about mission and a church that carried the Gospel with both the gravity and the lightness necessary for it to "take root" in different contexts, different cultures, and different hearts. It struck me as a breath of fresh air, like a flowing river of water that quenched something dry and barren within me.

So, when I was kicked out of my church and found myself in need of safety, community, and belonging, I found my way into St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Charlotte, NC. I found myself at the altar rail, kneeling in front of something, *someone*, I had always known but felt like I was encountering for the first time. I felt welcomed, affirmed, and seen.

I am here to talk about Beloved Community, about how we engage the Mission of God, and about what this looks like on a practical level.

For me, it is not possible to talk about the Beloved Community without talking about the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, Christ continues to come to us, to be known to us, to be taken into us so that we may come to him, be known by him, and be taken into him. In

the Eucharist, we are swept up into a story that is far larger than we are, into a love that takes a lifetime and more to truly allow in.

When I knelt down at that altar rail all those years ago, I didn't have the words or the framework to name what I know feel to be true. It wasn't just bread and wine that I was receiving. I was kneeling in front of the sweep of salvation history. All of it, the full tide of the Kingdom of God, the powerful current of God's future, the electrifying energy of the Spirit of God – the one that fell on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost - was washing over me in that moment. This is the **Movement of God**, God's activity across the expanse of human history that seeks to repair what sin has broken.

Sin "is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation."

God created us to live in the fullness of God's love, but love requires choice – free-will, we had to choose to love God in return. Free-will also left open the possibility that human beings wouldn't choose to love God. Free-will meant the human beings could choose to love power, privilege, wealth, and security more than God. To turn from God is to turn towards sin.

God's response to sin is redemption and reconciliation.

Redemption is the act of God which sets us free from the power of evil, sin, and death.

In this journey from Sin to Redemption, God's Church is those people who have heard the voice of Jesus to turn from sin and who have been baptized into his saving death.

We are those who accept the freedom in Christ and, in that freedom, we get to join in God's mission. "God's missionary purposes are cosmic in scope, concerned with the restoration of all things, the establishment of shalom, the renewal of creation and the coming of the Kingdom as well as the redemption of fallen humanity and the building of the Church."¹ When you hear "Church" don't hear St. Swithun's in the Swamp or St. Patrick's on the Prairie. When you hear "building of the Church" what I want you to hear is "the building of a movement."

The Church (Big-C) exists because of God's choice. God chose us to represent God in the world. Being chosen by God isn't about *us*. It's not divine fire insurance. Each of our communities of faith are called to engage God's mission. This is the only way to the renewal and revival we seek. The Church does not exist for itself. We exist for God's

¹ *Mission Shaped Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pg. 85.

mission. The Church doesn't have a mission. The mission is God's and God's mission has a Church. That mission is reconciliation.

When Jesus stands up in Luke 4 to proclaim the God's Jubilee – a time of the renewal, restoration, reconciliation, justice, and liberation, he didn't just pull it out of thin air. The people of God have been patiently awaiting the coming of God's Kingdom for a long time. Jesus himself quotes the prophet Isaiah who, amid a backdrop of colonialism, imperialism, violence, hopeless, and oppression dares to proclaim:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

God's Kingdom has been a hope for God's people since the very beginning, since our faithful ancestor Abraham heard God's call and just began walking.

In the context of the Mission of God, the Beloved Community is simply this, and this is my own definition: the community of people whose lives have been so shaped by the hope of the Kingdom of God, that they have begun walking in that direction. The Beloved Community is not necessarily the Kingdom of God, though we can experience bits of the Kingdom in and through it. The Beloved Community are those are committed to living as if the Kingdom of God were here and now.

According to the King Center, the Beloved Community "Beloved Community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony. Rather, The Beloved Community was for him a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence."² The Kingdom of God is not something we can achieve. When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God,

² <https://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/>

he never says “go build it.” Human pride assumes that we can build the Kingdom of God. When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, he says that it’s like:

- A seed that just starts growing...
- A woman who loses a coin and gives everything she has to find it...
- A sower scattering seed on all types of soil...
- A wedding banquet...

When it comes to the Kingdom of God, the invitation of Jesus is not “build” or “take” but rather “experience,” “inherit,” “find,” “wonder.” The Kingdom of God is like standing on the sea shore. No one asks us to build the ocean, but if want to experience the ocean, we can look at it, but we also have to step in. We can breathe in the salty air. We can feel the mist on our skin. We can marvel at its power, its beauty.

What is ours to build is the Beloved Community. It is up to us to create, nurture, and sustain compassionate communities and if you look at the world around us, we are sorely in need of compassionate communities. Dr. King says that this is an “achievable goal” when enough people make up in their minds that the only way forward to compassion and justice.

Questions

1. What’s your image/idea of the Kingdom of God? Has it changed since childhood?
2. When have you experienced a glimpse of Beloved Community?
3. How is the idea of Beloved Community challenging to you personally?
4. How is it challenging to our collective way of living?