



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Giving Birth to Beloved Community”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*A strange necessity has been laid on me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and could achieve actual fact... Human life is One...all people are members of one another. This insight is spiritual and is the core of religious experience.* Howard Thurman

*Beloved Community means that when the Other is encountered the response is the extension of hospitality and friendship rather than suspicion, mistrust, and regarding difference as a threat. I dream of a world where people are not only able to cross borders but don't even erect borders or walls to be crossed.*

Taquiena Boston, Director of Identities-based Ministries at the UUA

### Sermon

On the back of your order of service we list several items. At the top are the Six Sources which inform our diverse, personal beliefs. Next are the Seven Principles which guide our behavior and outline our basic shared values. As a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we covenant, or promise, to affirm and promote the Principles and Sources. We do that by referring to the Principles and drawing from many Sources in our varied activities. Today's service draws on our Second Source: Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

Below these two is the Fellowship's own unique Covenant. This is the promise we make to fellow members. It states how we wish to be in relationship to each other. When you become a member of this Fellowship you agree to support, affirm and promote all three of these.

Sometimes we print on the back cover the Fellowship's Mission and Vision statements. During the course of the year they all get displayed.

If these items were *contracts* rather than *covenants*, we would understand these commitments as self-interested transactions enforced by a threat of penalty if broken. You sign a contract with a home-remodeler that provides you with legal protections should damage occur, for example. The threat of lawsuits and other liabilities aims to keep contractors in line and do what they say they will do.

In contrast, the covenant you sign to become a member is not a one-way, self-interested transaction because it is a *relational* agreement. There is no legal penalty or threat if you break it. You may feel guilt or shame if you don't live up to your agreement, but we won't sue you for non-compliance.

If we don't live up to the relationship, we work to repair it. Just like in a marriage, we vow to work at the relationship, to make the relationship all we hope it can be. Unless someone is habitually out of covenant and makes no effort to stay in covenant, we don't exclude anyone from membership. However, leaders will act in favor of the whole group if the health and safety of the larger congregation is at risk by one person's actions.

This may seem harsh for a free and open liberal organization. We don't like to think of ourselves in exclusionary terms. But our Covenant and Principles would be meaningless if we ignored the very things we promise to follow. And if anyone could act however they wish, this would not be a safe community, much less a Beloved Community.

Individualism has been a hallmark of Unitarian Universalism, but it is only a hallmark of an individual's right to pursue their own answers to religious questions. It is not an individual's right to harm others. That would violate our First Principle which recognizes every individual has worth and dignity and should be treated with respect.

It is when we live up to our principles and covenants that I believe we give birth to Beloved Community. I believe a congregation such as ours can be a beloved community writ small. We can be an example of what larger beloved communities can be.

You may associate the term 'Beloved Community' solely with Martin Luther King, but Josiah Royce coined it in the early 1900s 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.

Later, Benjamin E. Mays and Howard Thurman, two social-activist ministers, took Royce's idea further. Both greatly influenced King. Thurman wrote in "Desegregation, Integration, and the Beloved Community," an unpublished essay, "That which makes any community become the beloved community is the quality of the human relations experienced by the people who live within it."

Echoing this, King said the beloved community was "a voluntary cooperative experience of persons who understood their solidarity as a human family. The family achieved this goal by taking on responsibility for each other by affirming the worth of every person in the group."

We know King and Thurman were talking about America and its difficulty in recognizing non-whites as full members of society. Becoming the ideal community that affirms the worth of every person, King believed and Thurman stated, could not "be brought into being by fiat or by order; it is an achievement of the human spirit as [we] seek to fulfill [our] high destiny as children of God."

Desegregation was a federal order that would not change people's minds, hearts or relationships. According to King, desegregation will only produce "a society where men are physically desegregated and spiritually segregated, where elbows are together and hearts apart. It gives us social togetherness and spiritual apartness. It leaves us with a stagnant equality of sameness rather than a constructive equality of oneness." [Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, *Search for the Beloved Community*] Integration was a positive, relational act of love which could not be legislated. This is the difference between contracts and covenants. Beloved community will only be realized by changing people, not laws alone.

King once said, "We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." [Why We Can't Wait, published in 1964, page 77] In this he affirms our Seventh Principle – that we are interdependent with all that exists.

Because we are interrelated, liberation for the oppressed requires the liberation of all. By bringing blacks into right relationship with whites, by sharing economic, political, and social power, we would create the Beloved Community, or Heaven on Earth.

Regretfully, 50 years after Mays, Thurman and King lived, the Beloved Community does not yet exist. And the players we need to be in relationship with have widened to include those who self-identify as immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Gays, Lesbians, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and many other marginalized groups.

But we can create a Beloved Community here. And we can spread our commitment to right relations beyond our walls when we engage with others.

Some of you know I have become involved in a grassroots community effort called 'Welcoming Athens'. We are setting the groundwork to be a community that is in right relationship with all people, cutting across racial, class, economic, and immigrant status lines. I'm involved because I see too much that is broken in Athens, in America, and in the world. We can tackle the world one community at a time. But I have hope that religious communities like ours, that know how to get along despite our differences, can be an example of beloved community for the world. I believe we can be leaders for creating a just and equitable world by doing what we do best: by being in covenant with our values and working each day to realize them.

If you think our world is in need of beloved community, than you may be outraged by deportations that take mothers and fathers away from their infants. You must be outraged by the rate of incarceration of black men or that their lives seem not to matter. Beloved community will save us from these tragedies. Love will save us.

Just a few days ago William J. Barber published an editorial online. He powerfully expressed his thoughts and feelings on this subject:

What America needs is a revival to heal our soul and bring together a new vision of beloved community. We need spaces where we sit down together in our neighborhoods, young and old, black, white and brown, rich and poor, Republican, Democrat, and Independent to talk about who we've been and who we want to be. We need

transformational coalitions where we listen to other people's pain and internalize their hopes to the point that their issues become our issues.

And after we've sat down to mourn and dream together, we need to stand together before school boards and City Councils. We need to assemble on our state house lawns and shout aloud with Langston Hughes, "America never was America to me / and yet I swear this oath, / America will be!" We will become the nation we've not yet been only by recovering the Movement mentality that gave rise to America's First and Second Reconstructions. The hope we can believe in will not be on the ballot in 2016. But that does not mean we can't work together toward it. If we give ourselves to prophetic lament, it can lead us to the Movement building that will give rise to a Third Reconstruction.

This moral revolution of values is what I'm devoting myself to in 2016. But I am a father as well as a pastor and political leader. I have to talk to my five children who keep asking me, "Dad, do they want to kill us all?" These are the precious lives I have to protect from thugs among the police and bangers in the hood, even as I continue to get threats from racists who would rather see me dead than challenge lies and speak the truth in love. Only a new society can make us all safe. Together we have to build that society because all children are our children.

Our Unitarian Universalist values and our belief that we are interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent, should prompt us into the public square, into the courts, and into solidarity with those who are suffering. I know the world does not have to be as it is. I know we can be that beacon of liberal religion, that shining city on a hill that can help lead the way.

May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Do you feel connected to a community? If so, what are the essential ties or bonds that make you feel a part of that community? If not, what separates you from feeling connected?
2. Do you invite others into getting involved in issues that matter to you? What encourages or discourages you from doing so? Share a time when you may have tried to involve someone.
3. Describe a time you felt left out or doors were closed to you. In what ways might these feelings inform your views about immigrants, refugees, and those you feel are different from yourself?