

## **“Beloved Community: In the Shelter of Each Other”**

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden  
Celebrating Father’s Day and Flower Communion  
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*Tiospaye*.... It’s a Sioux word meaning “the people with whom one lives.” Lest you think I’ve delved into the Rosetta Stone Sioux Part I, I have yet to open the cover to my Rosetta Stone Spanish Part I. *Tiospaye* is a term held up by Mary Pipher, author of such pivotal works as *Reviving Ophelia* and, the book for which *tiospaye* is core—*In the Shelter of Each Other*. Dr. Mary Pipher is also a psychotherapist and a longtime member of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, the capital city of Nebraska.

Nebraska, the middle of nowhere, some of you might be musing. Not really, no more than Iowa, where I grew up as did at least one other member of this congregation. Lincoln and Des Moines are not exactly the Big Apple or even an understated Bean Town, but they are hubs of the heartland, where dwelling “in the shelter of each other” is as rich and challenging as it is here in New England or the Deep South, or the Far West, or the Far East.

When Jane Dioguardi, a vibrant member of this aspiring beloved community that is UU Meriden, won this spring’s service auction bid on the choice of a sermon topic, she chose without hesitation: “Beloved Community: In the Shelter of Each Other.” “Yes!” I responded. “Are you familiar with Mary Pipher’s work?” She all but jumped up and down in recognition, and I showed her my dog-eared coffee-stained copy. What a natural marriage of topics—to link “beloved community,” that mantra of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with Mary Pipher’s seasoned observation of what it means to be “in the shelter of each other.” So too we connect Father’s Day, in all its complexity, with the distinctly Unitarian Universalist ritual of the Flower Communion.

Back to *tiospaye*. The people with whom we live are not necessarily our biological families. The people with whom we find shelter and offer shelter are not necessarily our biological or even adopted families. In this sanctuary this morning, I’m guessing that we hold stories of our biological and adopted families and fathers that stretch across the spectrum of beloved to tolerated to estranged to tragically dysfunctional. A beloved family, a beloved father, is some curious reality of luck and mindful compassion. Beloved community is the goal of nonviolent behavior that rises from intentional compassion and a deep understanding that we are all family. Whatever dysfunctions we have are no excuse for not pursuing the path that Dr. King expounded and modeled.

Was it because he was just a born saint? I don’t think so. Any of us who are moderately acquainted with his life know that Dr. King had his share of follies and frailties, and he too stood on the shoulders of prophetic women and men who came before him. The very term “beloved community” was borrowed from Josiah Royce, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher/theologian who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation, of which Dr. King was a member. So too Dr. King borrowed that now famous claim that “The arc of the universe is long,

but it bends toward justice” from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian abolitionist minister/theologian Theodore Parker. We know also that Dr. King was profoundly influenced by the non-violent principles and practices of Mahatma Gandhi, with whose family he met in 1959, just eleven years after Gandhi’s assassination and nine years before King’s own assassination. He and we abide in the historic and present “shelter of each other” for gifts received and gifts passed on.

Beloved community is not a la-la land where all are prosperous without a care in the world. It is rather the inevitable outcome of intentionally pursuing and practicing principles of non-violence grounded in an understanding of brotherhood/sisterhood. At the age of 30, in his *Sermon on Gandhi*, Dr. King proclaimed that:

“The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, so that when the battle’s over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor.”

The battle to which he referred was rife with conflict, as battles are; but conflict needn’t be violent or disrespectful. So it is in a world rife with conflict. So it is in a community rife with conflict. So it is in a congregation in which conflict is inevitable. So it is in a family in which conflict is inevitable. Whenever a couple says to me, “We never fight!” I respond by saying, “You’re either not telling me the truth or you don’t live together!” When we abide in the shelter of each other, it’s not a rose garden, unless we count the thorns, those prickly appendages that are as much a part of the rose as the blossom.

So it is with the Flower Communion that we celebrate this morning. Its history holds beauty and brutality—the beauty of congregants bringing sprays of flowers from their yards and gardens, as you did this morning; the brutality of the rising regime that Norbert Capek would resist and whose resistance was met with his execution. The path to beloved community is wrought with peril, yet bends when least expected toward love and justice, like that long moral arc of the universe.

It’s simply impossible to find beloved community and to abide faithfully in the shelter of each other unless we’re willing to take the risks. In this faith and this congregation, we strive to do so. I’ve seen you in action; I’ve seen you in conflict; I’ve seen you struggle; I’ve seen you reach. I’ve seen you aspire, inspire, and perspire. I’ve seen you search your souls and make tough decisions. Surely one of the most difficult was earlier this year, when we were called to decide whether to accept back into this fold a previous member whose behavior in the past and whose attitude in the present suggested the strong possibility of dysfunction that could cause great harm to our youngest in the future. It was perhaps the most difficult decision to which I’ve been party throughout my ministry, and it rocked my confidence in how Universalist I really am.

Does beloved community ever mean saying “No?” Does the love in which our covenantal community is grounded ever become tough love? What are the ramifications of affirmative answers? I still struggle with these matters. Will there always be a trace of brokenness in this community even as we aspire toward beloved inclusiveness? Are there episodes in our congregational life when an honest mirror stares back with blemishes?

Being in the shelter of each other ensures that each of us is a check and balance on all of us and all of us are checks and balances on each of us. That proverbial observation that “humility is the beginning of wisdom” is an understatement. Humility is not the same as doubt; it is rather an acute awareness that we are flawed. We trip; we reel; sometimes we even careen in our attempts at wholeness and our temptations that lead us far from it. To the extent that this community, this congregation, is beloved is also the extent to which we can admit our frailties to one another as well as celebrate whatever acts of communal compassion we may have helped make possible.

I’m one of the lucky ones to have grown up in a family that was overall deeply caring and with a father who was blessed with a rollicking sense of humor that beveled the edges of his strong opinions. As I ventured forth into the world of college and, heaven forbid, seminary, I came into increasing conflict with Dad over primarily political issues. We could both be stubborn, and neither of us was good at backing down. As for my Mom, how frequently did she raise her voice in my direction: “Stop arguing with your father, Jan! You’re going to give him a heart attack!” Guilt, schmilt! Sometimes I think guilt gets a bad rap in this faith. It can be quite useful, and my Mom was a master at it. Did this make her a bad Mom? I don’t think so. Did it make me a more compassionate daughter? Well, it took awhile.... but I hope I’ve learned that when I’m in conflict with someone I love, or even someone I don’t particularly care for, compassion overrides content.

I don’t want in any way to understate the real cruelties that can be transmitted between parent and child. Their aftermath commonly leaves scars that linger. Many of us have sought the help of psychotherapists to heal. Psychotherapy can be healing, but there’s an alarm that goes off after the standard 45 or 50 minutes, and therapists are human. Therapists can also do their share of harm in addressing fragments of a life story as if it were the whole story. Mary Pipher, a therapist herself, writes that, “Nobody calls out for their therapist on their deathbed.” (28)

When families work, they provide grounding and a far greater capacity to love our neighbors as we love ourselves than perhaps any institution I could name. Families need not be biological families or families of adoption. They can be extended families. For some of us, many perhaps, this congregation is an extended family.

None of us can be the singular catalyst for healing another. We need the check and balance of community with individuals liberated to speak the truth in love and sometimes the truth in love minus one. We need the tempering influence of cohesive caring community.

Last night in this congregation, we observed a communal rite that weaves in so many ways the strands of cohesive caring community. How apt that our Annual Meeting began with a potluck. Can’t we just come right out and say it? A potluck is a UU sacrament! It sets the tone for good stuff to follow—like a business meeting in which members of this congregation stretched beyond what any of us might have anticipated to ensure that we will sustain the shared ministry to which we are called. It’s not easy. It’s ongoing. We’re still at it. As long as this congregation is alive, we’ll continue to stretch, flexing the muscles of our souls to be as faithful as we can be to a mission that is ever and aptly in flux, but always grounded in a covenant of love—bottom line, caring behavior.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Rev. Norbert Capek, Theodore Parker.... How far back might we go to name fathers—fathers especially on this day—who have sought to balance a commitment to their spouses and children with a call to issue a message of hope and justice in a world of oppressors and oppressed? They spent days and weeks away from their families, so intensely did they heed this call. Three out of the four paid with their lives, and Parker was rebuffed by his colleagues for resisting their biblical literalism, however Unitarian they claimed to be.

As we hold these blossoms in our laps, as we hold memories and living images of fathers and stepfathers and grandfathers in our hearts, let's take a moment of silence to hold also our history, individual and communal, blessed with beauty and scarred with brutality. In the emptiness of silence, let us breathe in who we have been, and let it go. Let us breathe in who we are, and free ourselves from hurts past. Let us breathe in who we can be, and know that we are on the path.

(Moment of silence)

Beloved community is not a goal for the faint of heart. Being in the shelter of each other is not a kumbaya party. Together they call us to look into the eyes of another and see our own—teary, smiling, sobbing, laughing, in anguish, in celebration, in discovery, in epiphany, in faith that we can walk the path, but never alone.

So may it be. Amen

**Sources:**

“The Beloved Community,” from *The King Philosophy*, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy>.

Mary Pipher, Ph.D., *In the Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1996.