

**Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
February 21, 2021
Rev. Andrew Frantz**

Beloved Community

Thank you, Gisela, for reading that poem by Hope Johnson.

My morning message is about beloved community, and I want to ground that message in Unitarian Universalist theology. Classical Universalist theology is part of Christian theology. Universalism said that everyone is saved. This is in contradiction to the notion that some Christians believe—that when we die we are judged by God, and some people go to hell while others go to heaven. A Universalist Christian says, “No; a loving and merciful God would not send people to hell. Everyone is saved.” That’s classical Universalist theology.

Modern day Unitarian Universalists take that a step further. For modern day UU’s, many of us have a very different idea about heaven and hell, and it’s not so much about what happens after this life—Unitarian Universalists are mostly more concerned with what happens in this life. It’s not about what happens after we die and then we’re judged, like some Christians believe. It’s not about the Hindu belief that we are reincarnated and that our behavior in this life, our Karma, affects how we will be reincarnated in the next life. Instead Unitarian Universalists are concerned with this life. What humans do in this life. And the idea of heaven and hell then becomes: what do we create, as human beings, with the gifts we are given, on this earth?

And yes, we create hell on earth. Through war. Through greed and poverty. Poverty is a choice that we make as a society in how we treat one another and how we distribute wealth. Hell on earth is brought about by “othering.” Of course we are different, but when we emphasize our differences and see people as the “other”—and usually that means “less than”—that leads to racism and all the forms of oppression that we have created as humans on this earth. So in that way, we create hell on earth.

And if that’s true, then heaven on earth can be thought of as the ideal of human community. What’s the ideal of human community? What would that look like? It would look like people being authentic with one another. Being open with one another. Being caring and loving—doesn’t this sound like heaven? People respecting one another’s differences. People being accountable when harm is done. We will harm one another: we’re humans. In beloved community—which is the name I’m giving to this idea of heaven on earth—in beloved community, we hold ourselves and each other accountable when harm is done, and we return to being authentic, open, caring and loving, respecting one another’s differences. When all of this exists, then we thrive in joy. We thrive because we are able to freely express ourselves: our best and truest selves. All of us, in all of our quirkiness and all of our beautiful diversity.

That's my version of beloved community and how it's grounded in Unitarian Universalist theology. Here's my question for you: where in your life have you found or experienced something that approaches this ideal of beloved community—a place where people together are authentic, open, caring and loving, accountable, where people freely express their best and truest selves with joy? Where have you experienced that? I hope you have—at least a glimpse, or at least for a short time—maybe in a family, maybe in a classroom, maybe somewhere else; maybe in a congregation: maybe this one. Where have you experienced it in your life, and how can you encourage and maintain that sense of beloved community, in the communities that you are part of? That's what I'm asking you to reflect upon this morning.

I'm going to tell my story of a place where I found something that approached beloved community. It was when I went to seminary, which is minister school. About five years ago, I decided that I wanted to be a minister. We refer to this as discerning a call to ministry, and ministers sometimes make a big deal of it, as though we have been spoken to. For me it was a decision, and it was a life-changing decision, my call to ministry.

When I went there, to Meadville Lombard Theological School—it's in Chicago and it's one of the two UU seminaries in the country—what I found and experienced there was something akin to beloved community. People being authentic and open; caring and loving; respecting one another's differences; being accountable to one another when harm is done.

Let me tell you about some of my classmates and the people that I met there. One of my classmates, their call to ministry involved a vision of a pagan goddess telling them to go into Unitarian Universalist ministry. That's one of my classmates in seminary. One of my classmates in seminary, who's now a UU minister in the Midwest, was raised as a Pentecostal Christian and still preaches that way, without notes, extemporaneously; and this person is a devout communist. This person connects their communist politics to their Christian belief about what Jesus would do, not having personal wealth. I'm inspired by this person—the “commie preacher,” who is a Unitarian Universalist. One of my classmates in seminary, their ministry is not serving a church or a fellowship: their ministry is at a YMCA, teaching Zumba classes to people. And in their spare time they are the lead singer of a rock band. One of my colleagues in seminary, when we had an anti-racism class, they taught me that their people are Appalachian white people. And that the concept of white supremacy and the way we were talking about it applied very differently to those white people, white Appalachians, who are characterized by low material wealth and strong community. That really opened my eyes. One of my professors spoke Klingon and liked to knit sweaters; one of my professors told us that their theology was a mixture of 12-step philosophy—such as you would experience in an AA meeting—a mixture of 12-step theology and religious naturalism.

I'm saying all this to try and illustrate that I found my people there in seminary, as I was finding myself, and that finding my people was not a narrowing but a broadening. Not a narrowing of who my people are, but a broadening.

Let me illustrate it this way with a counter-example. Sometimes I find my people as a sports fan. This I'm describing as a narrowing. I will go to the game, I wear my hat, I wear my shirt; we're all wearing the same symbols; we're all cheering for the same thing, getting angry at the same thing—and those are my people because we're all together and believing in the same thing. But I say that's a narrow sense of "these are my people." I'm not saying that's wrong. I have a place for that in my life. But I value more when I find my people and when saying "these are my people" means more and more and more different people who are my people. And because there are more and more people who are my people, I can be more fully myself.

I have to say that it's not perfect, this community I'm describing—this beloved community of Unitarian Universalist ministers. That's great and there's a lot of beauty there, and it's not perfect. The UU ministers I know who are immigrants; who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color; who are transgender—they have a harder time finding support, finding work and maintaining work as Unitarian Universalist ministers. It's not perfect, but I still call it beloved community.

I think there's a lesson for us here. I asked you before, where do you find beloved community? I'm asking us to think about how we create that here in the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan—how we create and maintain the sense of beloved community here. Can we really do that, knowing how hard it is? It's hard because we will fall short. We will harm one another. But my vision is that we can be a people, a congregation who are authentic with one another; who are open; who are caring and loving; who respect one another's differences, who hold one another accountable when harm is done—and through all that we find greater joy. We can better express our best and truest selves.

That's what I found when I went to seminary. Because of that experience of finding my people and knowing that my people were broader, I became more fully myself. I was able better to take off the mask that I wear; to take myself out of the box of how I appear—to be more angry, more colorful, more exuberant, more myself. Because that pagan classmate, that is me; that communist, that is me; that person who believes in the 12-step program, that is me; the person who is leading the Zumba classes, that's me.

Can we dare in this place to take off our masks; to welcome each other more fully, to be more open and more loving?

I'm going to go back to the words of Hope Johnson that Gisela read a few moments ago right before I started speaking. The Rev. Dr. Hope Johnson—unfortunately she died in December. Hope Johnson was a UU minister, born in Jamaica, and served as a mentor for other UU ministers who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Color. She said,

*We are one,
A diverse group
Of proudly kindred spirits
Here, not by coincidence--*

But because we choose to journey--together.

*We are active and proactive
We care, deeply
We live our love, as best we can.*

*We ARE one
Working, Eating, Laughing,
Playing, Singing, Storytelling, Sharing and Rejoicing.
Getting to know each other.
Taking risks
Opening up.
Questioning, Seeking, Searching...
Trying to understand...
Struggling...
 *Making Mistakes**

*Paying Attention...
 Asking Questions
Listening...
 Living our Answers
Learning to love our neighbors
Learning to love ourselves.*

*Apologizing and forgiving with humility
Being forgiven, through Grace.*

*Creating the Beloved Community--Together
We are ONE.¹*

I will end with this: Beloved community is possible in our families, in our close circles of loved ones and friends; it is possible in a congregation like this one. May we keep expanding our meaning of “my people” to include more and more people. May we dare to unmask ourselves and to reveal our true strength and power. Our true loving, caring, beautiful individual selves. This is my prayer. May it be so.

¹ Hope Johnson, “One Love.” Voices from the Margins, Jacqui James and Mark Morrison-Reed, eds. Skinner House, Boston, 2012.