

## **“Side by Side in Beloved Community”**

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.*

I love the image that was shared in our Time for All Ages of our Unitarian Universalist principles as a keystone arch. The arch is created by the existing seven principles of Unitarian Universalism with the 1st and 7th as the pillars and the 4th as the keystone at the center. The Time for All Ages asked us to imagine the proposed 8th Principle as the ground upon which the Seven Principles are held - a foundation to keep the others steady.

When I see and imagine the archway, the emptiness beneath the arch feels like an invitation. I wonder who will cross that threshold. Imagine with me. Who will rest beneath the arch and lean against its strong stones? Who will want to enter the house of love on the other side? Will they be able to enter? Will they feel welcomed? Will their gifts be received joyfully and gratefully? Can they be reassured that the suspicion or discrimination that they encounter in almost every part of their life isn't also present here? Will they be able to be a part of this community in the fullness of who they are?

As a religious and spiritual community, we come together with purpose to welcome all and build a loving community as stated in our mission statement. Like other Unitarian Universalist congregations, we seek to build the Beloved Community. This commitment is expressed in our Congregational Covenant: we encourage each other in the brave work of creating a more Beloved Community.

The President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray recently wrote in the UU World: “The most profound theological gift I received from Unitarian Universalism is the belief in and commitment to Beloved Community. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described Beloved Community as one of unconditional love, which seeks the fullest unfolding of the personality of every person. In the Beloved Community, racism, poverty, and discrimination would not be tolerated and would instead be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of kinship.”

The dream of Beloved Community enlivens how we treat one another within our church, how we treat our neighbors, how we treat strangers. Yet, we know that Beloved Community remains an aspiration even within our Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Rev. Frederick-Gray questions, "...if the Beloved Community is so foundational, why do we struggle to live into its liberating and inclusive practices within our own communities?"

To answer this question, she points to the tension within Unitarian Universalism between individualism and interdependence.

The roots of our individualistic theological beliefs have promoted freedom of thought, self-determination, and human dignity as core values. These roots are also connected with ideologies of perfectibility and superiority that - without the counter-balance of humility and mutuality - have supported conquest, domination, and oppression of others.

The roots of our theology of interdependence place our human needs and desires in relationship with a divine love that encompasses all. This theology of interdependence says that the fate of all is interconnected, and none of us can go it alone. This interdependence can also bind us together in ways that are challenging and frightening as revealed by the past two years of living through a global pandemic in which we came to know quite intimately our dependence on one another for our health and well-being.

One of our tasks as a community is to discover and commit to the liberating and inclusive practices that honor and uplift our individual dignity and our interrelatedness.

Within this congregation, we have already started this journey of discovery and commitment. You have stretched yourselves to understand more fully the history of racism and other forms of oppression and injustice. You have engaged in the inner work of better understanding yourselves and the sources of your own biases. You have shown up in solidarity with LGBTQ+ youth leaders. You have supported investments in making our building more accessible and learned more about how to welcome people with neurodiversity and mental illness into this community.

We do this because building Beloved Community means coming alongside one another with love and commitment. When we come alongside one another, we listen to one another's stories with curiosity. We seek to understand what the other hopes for and dreams of for their life. We

let others know what we need. We are moved by compassion to help one another. We ask to be held accountable to our commitments. And, we call one another back into relationship when we go astray.

Beloved Community makes it possible for the fullness of our humanity and experiences to be present together. That is the fullness within each individual and also the fullness among us as a community.

This aspiration to have the fullness of life is one I believe we all share regardless of background or identity. Yet, we must also recognize the barriers that exist that keep us from fully realizing lives in which we can flourish and thrive.

These barriers can be due to gender, sexual orientation, education, poverty, disability, language, race, and other identities and circumstances that are the basis of both discrimination and systemic oppression. Some of us may face intersecting oppression, in which multiple facets of one's identity converge to bring about a particular experience of injustice and inequality and these facets of identity cannot be separated. History has also shown that racist beliefs of white superiority have been foundational to the ways that all kinds of injustice and oppression become embedded in our systems and institutions.

The proposed 8th Principle, which you will discuss and vote upon today, calls us as a congregation to continue the journey of building Beloved Community through anti-racist and anti-oppressive actions taken together.

It is a collective commitment because, just as racism, ableism, sexism, and economic disparities are manifested in the systems created by our relationships with one another, these oppressions and barriers can only be dismantled in relationship with one another.

No one of us can take anti-racist and anti-oppressive action by one self. It is in interdependent, collective community that we move towards liberation.

Let us return to that entryway into the house of love. If we made a commitment to building a diverse multicultural Beloved Community, if we acted with accountability to dismantle racism and other oppressions, who else might show up and find a place here? Who might return who came and left? Who might stay?

If we made a commitment to building a diverse multicultural Beloved Community, if we acted with accountability to dismantle racism and other oppressions, what would we use our collective will to do together outside these walls?

We know that we are not called into a house of love to stay comfortably within its sheltering walls. Outside these walls, discrimination and injustice persist. Racism, ableism, sexism, and economic disparities keep our neighbors, and also ourselves, from living the full and flourishing lives we all seek. And so, what can we, what will we do together to bring into reality the world we dream of? Can we commit to moving forward together?

The Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed says, “The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.”

Take a breath.

Feel that connectedness.

And, let us be inspired to act together.