

One Region / One Dream? The Beloved Community

By: Fr. Randall Phillips, St. Blase Parish, Sterling Heights

Addressing the National Press Club in 1962, Martin Luther King Jr., unequivocally stated the goal of the civil rights movement. "Our goal is freedom." This freedom, however, was placed in a context. King continues, "This is the dream. When it is realized, the jangling discords of our nation will be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." ("An Address Before the National Press Club," in A Testament of Hope, James M. Washington, ed., San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, pp.104-105. See also, "The Case Against Tokenism," in the same volume, p.111.)

Here freedom is understood in the context of community. In *Stride Toward Freedom* King writes that the end of his activist faith was "redemption and reconciliation...the creation of the beloved community." (Stride Toward Freedom. New York: Harper and Row, 1958, p. 84.) That phrase, "The Beloved Community" is intimately bound to the life and thought of Martin Luther King Jr. Scholars have said that the beloved community was "the organizing principle of all his thought and activity." (Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp, Jr. Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998, p. 129.) Where did this idea come from? What did he mean by "the beloved community"? How does it concern our community in southeast Michigan today?

For Christians, the phrase, "the beloved community" contains echoes of the Gospel according to John. In this Gospel we are introduced to "the beloved disciple" and there is a great emphasis on unity and love. The phrase, "the beloved community," however, has its origin in the philosophy of Josiah Royce and R.H. Lotze. Their thought greatly influenced *Personalism*, a school of

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thought to which King was predisposed. While Personalism impacted King's thought, the centrality of community runs much deeper. One of the evils of slavery and later segregation and discrimination was the breakdown of community. In reaction against this oppressed peoples developed a strong sense of community arising from their common experience of oppression.

The spirituals were one way of countering this harsh experience. These songs convey a strong communal sentiment filled with references to familial relationships and holding out the promise of reunion after death. The familiar *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*, (a number one hit for the Highwaymen in 1961) is a spiritual about the soul's journey after death. The appeal is to the Archangel Michael to row the boat across the River Jordan (a metaphor for death.) "Sister" is asked to help trim the sail and the line "milk and honey on the other side" in older, more authentic versions reads, "meet my mother on the other side."

("Michael Row the Boat Ashore," Wikipedia.org) In The spiritual *Want to Go to Heaven When I Die* each verse begins with a different relational tie:

1. Want to go to heaven when I die
2. Want to see my mother when I die
3. Want to see my father when I die
4. Want to see my sister when I die
5. Want to see Jesus when I die

(Lead Me, Guide Me: Chicago: GIA Publications, 1987, #315)

Recent scholarship has studied the African impact on King's thought. The concept of *ubuntu* crystallizes the African people's communal spirituality. Ubuntu can be summed up as "a person is a person through other persons." ("Ubuntu Africa: A Christian Interpretation," in Ubuntu in a Christian Perspective, ed. J.H. Smit, M. Deacon

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and A. Shutte, Potchefstroom, South Africa: Potchefstroom University Press, 1994, p. 14.) It is in and through community that a person learns who they really are and finds their true self. King would adhere to this belief.

King maintained that civilization really began when cooperation replaced competition, when our ancestors put down their stone axes and began working together. The dream of community became a trademark of a King sermon. He often repeated lines such as, "All of humanity is involved in a single process of destiny"; "All life is interrelated... nations, just like individuals, are interdependent..." and he frequently quoted John Donne's *No Man is an Island*. (For example, "The American Dream", A Testament of Hope pp. 209-210; "A Christmas Sermon on Peace", A Testament of Hope, p. 254; "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution", A Testament of Hope, pp. 269-270; Stride Toward Freedom, 84.)

The dream of the beloved community was built upon humanity's interdependence. What affects me necessarily affects you. We are mutually dependent on one another and need each other to address our needs, to grow and to become fully human to reach our potential.

All life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality. (Strength to Love. New York: Harper and Row, 1963, p. 70.)

King's belief in the beloved community functions on three levels: a dream for America, a dream for the world, a dream about the nature of reality itself. King's dream of the beloved community has sometimes been mistakenly equated with the American Dream. This error may stem from the Civil Rights Movement,

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like the founding of the United States, being interpreted in light of the Old Testament story of the Exodus from Egypt. It must be remembered that "the promised land" was precisely how Europeans saw the new world as they escaped from the "Pharaohs" of intolerance in their native lands. So when King would speak of "the promised land of integration and freedom", or "the promised land of economic and cultural stability," or to "have been to the mountain top and to have seen the promised land," (Why We Can't Wait, p. 73; Strength To Love, p. 80; "I See the Promised Land," in A Testament of Hope, p. 286.) King appears to be echoing sentiments similar to those of the early colonists of the United States. In fact his imagery is borne of the black sermon tradition and the symbolism of the spirituals.

King's dream of the beloved community, while it is by his own admission "deeply rooted in the American dream", ("I Have A Dream," in A Testament of Hope, p. 219.) is broader than the American Dream. For the Baptist minister, America itself "is essentially a dream, a dream as of yet unfulfilled. It is a dream of a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and creeds can live together as brothers." ("The American Dream," in A Testament of Hope p. 208.) The Beloved Community is international in scope. King argues that one must develop a world perspective. "The American dream will not become a reality devoid of the larger dream of a world brotherhood and peace and good will. The world in which we live is a world of geographical oneness and we are challenged now to make it spiritually one." ("The American Dream," in A Testament of Hope, p. 209) This world-wide dream of community becomes more pronounced after he receives the Nobel

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Peace Prize, an honor he accepted "in behalf of the civil rights movement [and] ...on behalf of all men who love peace and brotherhood." (Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech," in A Testament of Hope, p.224.) From this time on his criticism of war becomes prominent as King often preached about the interrelatedness of racism, poverty and war.

But even if it were not present [the Nobel Prize] I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men - for Communist and capitalist, for their children and ours, for black and white, for revolutionary and conservatives?...What then can I say to the "Vietcong" or to Castro or to Mao as a faithful minister of this one? Can I threaten them with death or must I not share with them my life? ("A Time to Break Silence," in A Testament of Hope, p. 234.)

The dream of the beloved community is directed toward reconciliation: reconciling black and white, rich and poor, Americans and Vietnamese.

Finally, the beloved community is a transcendent belief about the nature of reality itself. King maintains, "He who works against community is working against the whole of creation." (Stride Toward Freedom, p.106.) At this level the Baptist Minister brought his Christian faith to weigh in on the beloved community:

The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God's triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community creating reality that moves through history. (Stride Toward Freedom, p. 87.)

Here King interprets the traditional Christian doctrines of redemption and trinity as the foundation, source and sustenance of community.

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To what does the beloved community challenge us who reside in southeast Michigan? On January 20th, the day after the MLK Holiday, we will celebrate the inauguration of the first African American to be elected President of the United States. At times the rallies held during President–elect Barack Obama’s campaign were reminiscent of the civil rights movement.

During the marches and gatherings of the 1960’s King said that at times he felt as if he was experiencing the beloved community.

As I stood there with them and saw white and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizers, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shop workers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I know I was seeing a microcosm of mankind of the future in the moment of luminous and genuine brotherhood. (Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? New York: Harper and Row, 1967, p. 9)

Forty years later we must remember our history: it is one thing to sustain this momentum for a few months toward an election, it is a greater challenge to sustain momentum for the long haul. As the long term burdens weigh upon us how will our region respond? Will we stand together as one region? Or will we allow job losses, foreclosures, economic sacrifices and fear take us into competition over and against one another? Will these difficult and stress filled times alienate our region one from another on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, gender and other “defining” categories? Or can we lay down our “stone axes” and reach out to one another in cooperation, understanding and solidarity. Will the difficult days ahead of us drive us into chaos or steer us toward being one region with one dream: the beloved community.