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Title: The Beloved Community

Series: Let's Talk About...

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Text: [Matthew 6:7-15](#)

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Today we are continuing our sermon series called *Let's Talk About It...* To kick off 2024, we are talking about all the things people often have questions on—theological topics we as staff chat about around the office, and well, the things we just don't really want to talk about. Last week Pastor Danny started us off on the topic of resolutions and baptism, and this Sunday, on the Rev. Dr. King Jr. Weekend, we will dive into the concept of the Beloved Community.

Before we dive in, though, I want to reiterate that this is a sermon series where each sermon is designed to be a conversation starter. Whether those conversations happen with us as staff, with each other, with your family at home, or internal conversation with yourself, what I say up here today is just the beginning of a conversation. Truly that is how all sermons work, but we are emphasizing that point with this series. It may come as a shock to some of you, but us pastors are not the end-all and be-all, and we don't have the final say. Thank God for that. Our faith journeys and our growth as people of faith are continual and happen in community when we discuss and learn together. So to assist us with that today, I have compiled some resources of books, websites, and documentaries that you can choose to use or not use following this morning's sermon. If you are here in person, there are small cards with a link or QR code in the back of our worship space. For those worshipping online, a link will be posted in the chat. My contact information will also be available on this link if you would like to continue the conversation with me.

So with that covered, let's talk about The Beloved Community. The Beloved Community is a term that was created by Josiah Royce, an American philosopher, in the early 1900s. The term was picked up by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, which was when it became more widely known.



The Beloved Community can be defined as a community in which everyone is cared for, absent of poverty, hunger, and hate. This Dr. King's true vision of heaven on earth, but not some far-off heaven on earth. No, it was his vision of our world that he believed was possible here and now, and he worked toward that vision every day. As we come to this day in our year when we remember the work that Dr. King and the nonviolence movement did and continues to do for not only Black people but all people in this country, we are going to talk about what it looks like for us to collectively work towards embodying the Beloved Community, heaven on earth.

I'm going to tap the brakes here for a second to be completely transparent about all we're going to talk about this morning. Before I set you up for a bait and switch or pull the rug out from beneath you or some other metaphor, today we're also going to be talking about what keeps us from heaven on earth here and now in this very moment—sin. Whew. I know it feels icky. It feels like let's just put that over here in its nice little box and forget about it and not talk about it. However, our sermon series is called *Let's Talk About It...*! So take a deep breath with me, fasten your seat belt, and let's take this ride together. And I promise we'll get to our destination just fine. Anyone who has been to our Faster Pastor fundraiser races can attest, I am a slow driver.

The Beloved Community was the vision Dr. King worked towards during the Civil Rights and nonviolence movement work, and this vision is rooted deeply in biblical texts and understanding. It embodies the very words we pray each and every week. The words we prayed just a few moments ago. In the gospel of Matthew 6: 7-15, we find instruction from Jesus on how to pray. Jesus tells his disciples and those around him how to pray and the words to say, the words we still say today. The scripture reads this way in the Common English Bible:

When you pray, don't pour out a flood of empty words, as the Gentiles do. They think that by saying many words they'll be heard. Don't be like them, because your Father knows what you need before you ask. Pray like this:

“Our Father who is in heaven,
uphold the holiness of your name.
Bring in your kingdom
so that your will is done on earth as it’s done in heaven.
Give us the bread we need for today.
Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you,
just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.
And don’t lead us into temptation,
but rescue us from the evil one.”

If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you don’t forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:7-15 CEB)

It is from this text that we get the words to the Lord’s Prayer that we pray weekly here in this space. Christians for ages have been saying this same prayer. We ask God, “Bring in your kingdom so that your will is done on earth as it’s done in heaven.” Heaven on Earth, bring it here and now. We, collectively, have prayed for it each week for thousands of years and many have dedicated their lives working for it like Dr. King, Ida B. Wells, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Day, and so many more.... So why isn’t it here? Where is the Beloved Community?

It is another thing we pray for each week, our sins. “Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you, just as we also forgive those who have wronged us.”

The most simple definition of sin is: actions/choices that separate us from God/the Divine.

Throughout the centuries, scholars and theologians have wrestled with the weeds of which moral codes, laws of God, etc. one must break in order to have committed a sin. But the common theme we see in sin is that it takes us further from God and from the Divine. And not just further away from God in the sky, not just further from God in the Spirit who moves among us and around us, but also further away from God who is within all of us—the Divine that dwells in all of us as beings created by God.

Separating ourselves from one another is separating ourselves from God. When we fail to recognize and honor the Divine and humanity in one another, we are falling short of our call. Sin is inherently relational and there are two different scopes we can put on sin:

1. Individual sin: personal choice, relational between you and God
2. Systemic sin: build up of sin, choices that separate humanity from God, in societal systems

Systemic sin is how years and years of systems within society are created with little individual sins building up. It is how we get widespread hate, poverty, and hunger, which is a direct threat to the reality of the Beloved Community.

Now I want to point out that while sin is this blocker we put in between ourselves and God, and each other, it does not keep us from God. In our scripture today Jesus gives us a prayer to help us on our way to making our relationship right with God and with others.

Just as there is individual and systemic or collective sin, there is also individual and collective responsibility. When we have harmed someone in a personal relationship, it is our responsibility to own that and to ask for and work towards forgiveness.

As a community, when we hurt someone or groups of people, it is our responsibility as a whole to also ask for and work towards forgiveness.

Both are so important, and differentiating between the two is as well. When a hurt is collective but we take it on as individual, as personal, all too often we are quick to defend ourselves, which is natural and understandable but dismissive in the process. It is often well meaning too! When we don't fully understand the hurt from someone else's perspective, we want to say, "Wait, let's pause for a second and think this through before doing anything."

Dr. King once said, "Justice delayed is too often justice denied."

How many times do we, as a collective, dismiss the voice of God, in the voice of a hurt community member, inviting us into a new way of seeing and understanding that might take us one step closer to heaven on earth. Instead of hearing attacks and complaints, how might we hear God speaking to us in the cries of help from others?

It is important that we ask forgiveness for our sins, individual and collective, and it is also important that we work actively to pursue a world that rights those wrongs and seeks to not do wrong in the first place. Our scripture from Matthew begins with the phrase, "Don't pour out empty words." I like to think that Jesus is telling us to mean what we say AND, take it one step further, do something about what you say. Pray with your actions.

There is one Disciples of Christ minister who comes to mind when I think of this concept, someone I look up to. This is Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, pictured here on a march with the Poor People's Campaign.



This campaign is a continuation of Rev. Dr. King's work towards the Beloved Community, working towards policies and societal changes to support those in poverty and the most vulnerable in our communities. It is one example of how we can pray with our actions.

Rev. Dr. King taught us with his life and work how it is to work together for collective responsibility and forgiveness. It is not about blame; it is about our call from God and the prayer that Jesus gives us.

What vision has God put on your heart? How can you bring our world one step closer to a place without hate, poverty, or hunger?

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."—Dr. King, *Strength to Love*, 1963

The bad news is, we're not perfect. We sin. We pull ourselves from God, from each other, from the Divine within one another.

The good news is, we were not made to be perfect. Instead we were made to be whole. So let us seek to lead with love, working together for wholeness and Beloved Community.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.