Title of Sermon: Beloved Community: Can it Heal a Fractured World?

Good morning. It is a great privilege to speak today about this wonderful concept of “Beloved Community.” Of course my title opens up with a question-Can Beloved Community Heal a Fractured World? And, I certainly hope I can be convincing enough for you to believe that Beloved Community is in indeed an antidote for a fractured and hurting world while also affirming that the more each of us builds and cultivates beloved community in our midst, the more our Emerson congregation will continue to grow and prosper and we as individuals will also greatly benefit in our own lives by being happier, healthier and actually living longer.

Years ago when Emerson was developing a new vision statement, many of those involved in the process advocated that the words, “beloved community” be an important aspect of who Emerson UUC is and is to become. “Beloved Community” is a term that was first coined in the early days of the 20th Century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce. However, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning. Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned this new world of Beloved Community to be one of brotherly and sisterly love and justice, where the races would be reconciled, and the deep and terrible wounds of racism and economic injustice finally healed.

“Our ultimate goal,” King said, “is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living—integration. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.”

Wow! What a powerful dream that Martin Luther King Jr continues to challenge us all towards and the great news is that our faith, our consequential faith provides us with immense tools and insights on how to bring this dream into reality. To talk our talk and walk our talk as Kathy Mittelman, our marvelous choir director told us in her May 1st sermon.

And so while it is important to have some understanding of the history of this word, what is most important is to share some insights and implications of beloved community here at Emerson and what each of us might do to build deeper, more compassionate and supportive community as a means to not only strengthen our ties to Emerson and one another but to also equip us to be an instrument of greater healing and compassion in a world in great need of these gifts.

So why is this important to me? In my last sermon on “Practicing the Virtues of Compassion,” I tried to be very open and vulnerable that I did not think my inherent nature was to be very compassionate and that I had to be truly intentional as a father, husband, brother, friend and human being to cultivate and practice compassion or else my “other nature” of the 3 S’s Survival, Selfishness, and Self-serving would dominate my actions.

I want to equally confess that my inherent nature is to love independence and autonomy. I recently turned down an attractive offer from a publicly traded company to buy my firm because I treasured not having anyone as my boss. (Except Claudia!) While I easily trust others, I don’t easily trust others in regards to their control over me. Despite my many years in the military and as a strongly practicing Catholic, I don’t like following some one else’s rules and while I want to assure you I pay my taxes, stop at red lights, and work hard at being a law-abiding citizen, I prefer life on my terms. And yet I know that for my life to achieve its greatest purpose, for me to fully utilize the talents and gifts that I have been given, I need to be part of a religious community, that that helps me develop a consequential faith and one that sparks and cultivates the divine in me and allows me to see and cultivate the divine in others.

At the heart of Beloved Community is the invitation we make to all those who grace our doors here at Emerson to be in relationship with a spiritual community that is deeply dedicated to nurturing our faith as Unitarian Universalists. As I have thought much about this concept I have tried to organize my learning and insights around the acronym, HAVE as in **HAVE relationships** in order to build and sustain beloved community.

**H is for humility**. The humility to be open towards others and needing others in our lives; the humility to know that your truth is only a piece of the truth and that we often cannot fully understand the whole story without other’s truths, perspectives. I know that for many of us, the words at the opening of each service, “We need not think alike to love alike” are always an invitation to be open.

Before we joined Emerson, my wife Claudia decided that for her, she could no longer accept being Catholic and that she needed to find her own faith community. While I was relatively happy being Catholic, as I spend far too much time away from Claudia during the week, I felt that it was important for us to be together on Sunday mornings wherever that might take us. After Claudia had visited a host of churches, she finally found Emerson and told me that I might enjoy it as well. The first Sunday I came to Emerson approximately 9 years ago, the Pastor was on Sabbatical in England and the service focus was on Hinduism. I vividly recall being asked to dance during a part of the service up and down the aisles along with Yvonne Pennington. As you might imagine, it was quite a shock to my system but a great one that began a marvelous transformation in my life to be open to other faiths and those with no faith, to be open to other political and sociological points of view, to be open to sexual orientation, to be open that what I have learned in life is biased and filtered and that I don’t see the world as it is but see the world as I am.

And there is such freedom when we don’t have to be right and it is okay to say, “I don’t know but I would like to. Can you help me better understand why you see the world the way you do?” And as others help you see a different reality, humility is having the grace to change your point of view and perspective. The call to beloved community begins with humility that you need others beyond yourself. I love this quote by Ralph W. Sockman, the great Pastor of Christ Church: *"True humility is intelligent self-respect which keeps us from thinking too highly or too meanly of ourselves. It makes us modest by reminding us how far we have come short of what we can be”*

**A is for acceptance**. Radical inclusion calls us to radical acceptance. I have often said that if all people could embrace and live the first UU principle to affirm the dignity and worth of all humankind, what a world that would be! Besides dancing in the aisles in devotion to the Hindu Gods Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti, one of the most significant and wonderful experiences at Emerson was when our dear friend Scott H’Doubler and our congregation president Don King decided after living in loving and committed relationship for over 25 years to have a commitment ceremony and invited all of the congregation to be witness to their commitment. Well, it seemed to me that most of the congregation attended and what a celebration of love that was! As I not only grew up Catholic but also spent 16 years in the military, I had been carefully taught to be homophobic. And seeing these two beautiful human beings express their love and devotion to each other seemed like the most natural thing in the world and certainly caused me to reevaluate so many things especially regarding marriage equality and the injustice that our society has had for so many years perpetuated against those who love someone of their own sexual orientation. It has been a source pride over the years in being an advocate for marriage equality not only in Emerson but, in my work and in my family. Perhaps nothing could be more important for Emerson in building beloved community that we continue to make it psychologically safe for all those who because of their sexual orientation or their ethnicity and race, or their religious orientation, or whatever society says to them that they are different, that this can be a sacred, safe and supportive sanctuary. When you feel truly accepted for who you are by others, you come to accept yourself as well. What a wonderful gift to give to each other!

**V is for vulnerability.** To be in authentic relationship with others requires me to reveal my real self and not all the masks that I have carefully constructed so that you only see what I want you to see. We need to share our stories with one another and when we really know each other’s stories, we drop all the pretense and see each other as we are and the power of that is healing and amazing.

When I was a cadet at West Point, I was deeply lonely. I had made the pursuit of achievement my principle focus in life and I created this great mask that told everyone else in the world that I was happy, confident, and “had it all together”. Yet inside, I was lonely, fearful, anxious, and had almost no friends to speak of. However, a Priest, Fr. Tom Devery, who had just started his Priesthood at West Point the same time I began my Plebe/Freshman year, worked hard despite my recalcitrance, to connect with me at a deeper level. It was such a new and profound experience for me as a young man to explore with this friend, my own emerging spirituality. In the Fall of my senior year through Fr. Tom’s encouragement, I attended a retreat program called, TEC-To Encounter Christ and it was a profound and moving spiritual experience that invited me to take down the masks and to be myself. At a certain part of the weekend, friends showed up at a “hootenanny” to show their support and to help us feel part of an extended family. I will never forget as a participant on the weekend, being led into a large gym that seemed to be filled with people holding candles and singing to us. At that moment I felt truly loved, accepted and it in turn gave me the freedom to love in return. One of the friends that came to support me was a beautiful young lady that I had gone on a few dates with. Turned out to be Claudia and we just celebrated 35 years of marriage last Tuesday. This was an early taste of Beloved Community-that you are part of something much bigger than yourself-that you are joined not just in heart but truly an extension of your very spirit. When you are vulnerable you open yourself up for others to be vulnerable with you and in that opening we find trust.

As the gifted writer Parker Palmer wrote, “The heart is where everything begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, and rediscover that we are members of one another.” (Pause and simmer.)

**And the E is for empathy**, to not only hear each other’s stories but to appreciate, respect and value those stories and in response to those stories, find ways to help and support one another. When our youngest daughter Molly was about 18 months old, she came down with a wicked and aggressive pneumonia. Thankfully Claudia was a pediatric nurse and would not accept the doctor’s early diagnosis of mild bronchitis and demanded that Molly be hospitalized and very rapidly at Scottish Rite hospital, we watched our daughter’s life be in great jeopardy. As Claudia and I would alternate being in the ICU bed with Molly, right next to Molly’s bed, only separated by a curtain, a young child just a bit older than Molly died from pneumonia. And in those moments I felt a helplessness that I had never experienced before in my life. With urgency and clarity, Claudia told me, “Call Fr. Tom.” You see this same priest that encouraged me to attend the TEC weekend, had married Claudia and also baptized and was Godfather to Molly. I reached out to Fr. Tom and he reached out to our extended faith community and through those bonds of beloved community, I heard the assurance that Molly was going to be all right. I came back to Claudia and told her in the same confidence that Fr. Tom had given me, “Molly was indeed going to be all right.” Maybe we got lucky or perhaps Fr. Tom had connected with the Devine beloved community and knew that our precious daughter still had bigger things to do in this world. And while Claudia and I eventually left the Catholic Church for different things here at Emerson, we have continued to forge deep bonds of friendship, connection, and shared responsibilities for we know that only in beloved community can we discover and cultivate our greatest and most fulfilled selves.

Martin Luther King Jr said that Beloved Community creates a type of love that that can transform opponents into friends. Love is the readiness to go to any length to restore community. And that the purpose of the church is to grow our capacity to love the divine, ourselves, and each other and to grow our ability to work together for a just world.

The ground of our being together is covenant, a promise that we each make to enter into relationship with one another. Especially given Emerson’s call to be a radically inclusive, open minded, beloved community, we will find plenty of opportunities to interact with those who are indeed radically different from us. And it is evitable that our egos will collide with those who do think and see the world different from us. Too often in our polarized world, the most common response to different is rejection and to solidify our beliefs and perspectives. Our path as UUs’s can be different. We begin each service with, “We need not think alike to love alike” to help us remember we are called to a higher standard and to an exciting opportunity to be our best selves through our capacity to build and sustain beloved community.

One of the most important concepts that I have taken to heart is the importance of intention. That when we are deliberate, purposeful, and intentional about the kind of lives we want to have, that intention creates a pathway for those qualities to show up in our lives. If my intention is to be compassionate and I remind myself of that intention as often as possible, it is almost impossible for compassion not to show up in my life in extraordinary ways. So when we have an intention to live in beloved community and for that beloved community to open our hearts, heads and spirit to others, it cannot fail to do so in our lives.

I want to challenge you and myself that to build beloved community begins with the intention to have compassionate and substantive relationships with one another. And through Humility, Acceptance, Vulnerability and Empathy our Beloved Community here at Emerson will grow and thrive.

Turns out though that by having compassionate and substantive relationships with others keeps us healthier, happier and we live longer! The Harvard Study of Adult Development tracked the lives of 724 men from 1938 to the present of which about 60 of these men are still alive. The clearest message from this 78-year longitudinal study is that ***great relationships keep us happier and healthier*** and it's the quality of our close relationships that matter most; not fame, wealth or high achievement.

Further research overwhelmingly tell us that who experienced various kinds of social contact increased their odds of survival— not just by a little, but by 91 percent, nearly doubling their odds of dodging the ultimate bullet for a long while. It wasn’t simply a question of living alone, or being married or single. What was important was being a part of a community in more ways than one— not just by being happily married, not only by belonging to clubs and groups, but by being involved in several of these activities and relationships at the same time. Having linked attendance at religious services to greater happiness and lower rates of cardiovascular disease and death, some epidemiologists have suggested that going to church is more effective than Lipitor, adding an average of two to three years to a person’s life. What an incredible deal by belonging to Emerson’s Beloved Community!

HAVE relationships here at Emerson. Be Loved Community.

So you see Beloved Community is not only an antidote to a fractured world but it is a wonderful pathway to have a full, amazing and happy life. I want to challenge you to make Beloved Community a true and meaningful intention in your life here at Emerson. Just think what we can really build here. Cobb County, Georgia, our nation, our world needs us.

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