

“Beloved Community: Weaving Our Way Anew”

A Sermon by the Rev. Alex Jensen

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, Canada

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As I begin today, take a moment to think back on a time when you experienced true belonging. If you're comfortable, I invite you to close your eyes, to sit comfortably in your chair, and to settle into the feelings and sensations of this moment...

Where are you? What are the sights, sounds, and smells? Who is there with you? What faces or names come to mind? Spend just a brief moment there, in this sacred glimpse of community and connection... Thank you. When you're ready, you may open your eyes.

For me, you've already heard a little of my story. My story of true belonging goes back, in part, to going to church with my grandmother. I picture those large rounded doorways of the First Unitarian Church of San José, California. Of walking through those doors, greeted by many smiling faces. My grandmother, the very same one whose hair is the colour of a red onion, who also writes the “gossip column” of the church newsletter. She had taken me to church with her when I was about eight years old.

I didn't know what to expect with church, being raised nonreligious without any frameworks of church or religion in our family life. I remember feeling some nervousness as I walked in for the first time, not knowing what this whole thing would be like. And yet, I also remember all of that melting away as I drank in the sounds of the music, the bright eyes and smiles on so many faces.

True to form, midway through the service I was whisked off to religious education classes, where I found belonging there, too. Now, my grandmother is a bit of a UU evangelist... She had sent me home with a thick stack of pamphlets all about Unitarian Universalism. *Talk about strategic!* She somehow knew they would one day come in handy. Or maybe she just knew that there was something important about my own life's story and trajectory with this faith. Funny enough, I came upon those pamphlets again in my teen years, when I was invited by my friends to join them at their other churches. Finding these pamphlets in a small corner of my room, those feelings of love and belonging came rushing back. I immediately knew that I wanted to attend a church that felt like Grandma's Church. A church where love was truly lived into, not a church where I had to believe certain things, or to change things about myself in order to be worthy.

I knew where to look because I had experienced this profound sense of belonging so early off. Many of us come to Unitarian Universalism with experiences from other communities and traditions. Some of us find that we've been a Unitarian Universalist for our whole life, or at least a lot longer than we've known about this faith. Some of us even wait our whole lives before discovering this beautiful tradition, wishing we might've stumbled upon it sooner. And, for those of us lucky enough to grow up in this tradition, we already know the immense value of what this faith does. How it truly saves and transforms lives.

Today, we're looking at the notion of Beloved Community and what it means for our community, in this new time and place. *We are at the start of something extraordinary!* So much intentional work has brought us to this new community, with our new building

and all of the ways, both seen and unseen, that people have loved this place into being. With over 180 years of history, this congregation has been many different iterations over its long life. A few different buildings and places that have been known as “FirstU” or “Toronto First.” We’ve had entire congregations form and dissolve over the years, as members and friends come and go. Many have come before, and there are an unknowable many who will come long after.

While we have this shiny new building, and, yes, it’s a beautiful new building—*I don’t want to diminish that*. We also know that the congregation itself is not the building. Rather, it’s the people. *You and me*. One of the hardest lessons from your wilderness years, from the time of the pandemic, was this same lesson: The church is not the brick-and-mortar building. It’s the community that comes together and continues to emerge and holds one another steady through hard times. We are the inheritors of an unbroken line and tradition from all those who have gone before. The community itself is not the building. It’s the people.

Some of you might know this from *First Light*, but my Master’s thesis was all about a UU theology of Beloved Community.¹ In a nutshell, Unitarian Universalists don’t have a theology in the God sense. We also don’t have a theology of believing, or all of us needing to agree on the same things we all believe in. Rather, Unitarian Universalists have a theology of doing. You might remember the old UU adage “deeds not creeds.” We are a people of *doing*. We need not believe alike to love one another and to do the work of justice in our world.

My answer to this question of a UU theology of Beloved Community is that UUs actively do and practice Beloved Community all the time. Beloved Community is more than an idealized utopia of congregations and communities. Instead, it’s a community that’s always in process, being shaped and re-shaped by one another beyond even forces of our full knowing.

We, Unitarian Universalists, cherish what I call “glimpse moments” of Beloved Community. These are those powerful moments when we witness an indescribable belonging beyond what words can capture. Moments like walking into church with grandma: a life-changing moment that would propel me into Unitarian Universalist ministry and congregations for my life’s work. These “glimpse moments” are just that: *glimpses* at the Beloved Community. Not just Beloved Community inside these four walls but *the* Beloved Community of Dr. King’s vision. The world community where we live in tune with the rhythms of nature and in harmony with our own beating hearts.

Now, while Dr. King gets much credit for popularizing a theology of Beloved Community, he was not the coiner or the originator of this phrase. Strangely, Beloved Community actually begins with a fellow Unitarian and a Harvard professor. Professor Josiah Royce was the first to coin the term in 1913. For Royce, he felt that religion inevitably fell short of truly addressing the inequities of society that it earnestly tried to name. Christian

¹ [“Beloved Glimpses: A Unitarian Universalist Theology of the Beloved Community and Implications for Our Shared World”](#), by Robert A. Jensen, *Harvard Divinity School*.

articulations of the “Kingdom of God,” for example, could name the guiding vision of creating heaven here on the Earth. And yet, as he also found, people strayed from concrete ways of helping make this world a better place to focus instead on life after death. Language of “Beloved Community” in his words named “one beloved and united community of all [humanity]...”²

In his view, the Beloved Community was more than glimpsable. It was the underlying “good news” of all religion. He believed that it was possible for humanity to grow more tight-knit: that our sense of loyalty to our common humanity would compel us to care for one another. That we’d feel responsible for these bonds, and that in holding one another in community, we could endeavour to practice community more fully to the benefit of all.

I want you to hear the emphasis on *the* Beloved Community. Beloved Community itself can’t be captured and contained within small, individual congregations. It’s a global vision that we can glimpse even in our own community here. But it’s not ours to own or to tame. When we try to relegate Beloved Community to an individual place, to a closed set of people... As a community that can only exist between four walls, that’s where we get into trouble. We make an idol of Beloved Community. Of this more expansive vision that’s possible, constraining it to our own terms, or how it’s always been within our four walls.

To go deeper, Beloved Community is at its core a theology of Love at the centre. It’s the widest, most courageous expression of Love that we can envision. It, therefore, demands that we do what we can to live fully into Love. But what’s actually at stake in loving this community and world into being? I lean on the Black feminist thinker and critic bell hooks, on what Love requires of us. In her view, Love is not just something that happens to us. *It’s something we do.* Something we practice, like our Covenant.

In her book so aptly named *All About Love*, she outlines seven core components to Love, if we’re insistent on not just repeating the same ways and systems of being in our world, but instead envisioning a new way together. Those seven components are: Care; Affection; Recognition; Respect; Commitment; Trust; and lastly Honest and Open Communication. In hooks’ own words:

To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients... Most of us learn early on to think of love as a feeling... When we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another’s spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive...³

This is where the work of Beloved Community lies. Where the “rubber meets the road,” not just within our walls but in society at large. We must learn ways to be together that are spiritually nourishing and sustaining, over ways that cause harm for ourselves and others. By loving one another and our world with these seven core essentials, we learn to out-insist the messages that society tells us with accepting things as they are. We glimpse

² [*The Problem of Christianity*](#), by Josiah Royce, New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, p. 11.

³ [*All About Love: New Visions*](#), by bell hooks, chapter 2, p. 2.

newer and better ways of being together. We glimpse a world woven whole. A world that is not here just yet... But is also not that far off.

As we think about who we want to be as a community, within these walls and within our broader Oakwood–Vaughan neighbourhood, how might we fully lean into an ethic of Love? When we envision the best of ourselves, the best of our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Shared Values, who are we called to become?

We are at a time of visioning and dreaming together: visioning in ways that partner with one another to truly serve needs greater than our own. Your congregation’s Mission, and its succinct tagline, is part of what called me to you. Those meaningful words of: Seek Freely, Connect Authentically, and Serve Passionately encapsulate our best hopes for who we hope to become. This also clearly articulates being a people of *doing*. It’s no coincidence that these are all verbs: *Seek, Connect, Serve*. Those aren’t just passive words. They’re words that require action; that require being lived into.

Our shared ministry together is just beginning. As I think about what this next chapter holds for us, I wonder about ways for us to intentionally and strategically live into our Mission; Into this Love ethic and the fullness of all that Love requires of us. As you consider me for your next settled minister, I can’t promise to know the way. I don’t have a fully-sketched roadmap for us to follow. Some of this is work that requires our mutual search and discernment together, not just the vision of the minister. What I can say to you is that I am open and willing. I am keen on fully realizing this vision of Beloved Community, not just here at First but in the community and world at large.

Our Reading from the Rev. Jennifer Nordstrom gives us a vision that’s audacious. So much to aspire to that seems hardly possible in this hurting world of ours. Yet, with our collective faith; with the faith that each one of us brings in this tapestry of hearts, hands, and voices... We might just glimpse this Beloved Community within our hearts and on the horizon of our own knowing.

My life is a product of Beloved Community. I wouldn’t be here now without the ways that I was loved into being: Without grandma taking me to church. Without Rev. Jeremy’s coffees. Without my home UU congregation in California taking me seriously as a teenager, welcoming me fully into its life. We each have had tastes of Beloved Community in our lives. Starhawk reminds us that community means strength: “We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned [that] we can only catch glimpses of from time to time.”⁴ Together, we might join our collective strength to do the work that needs to be done. Together, we can draw our circle wider still, becoming the incarnation of peace, Love, and justice that defies all pessimism for our world.

For this next chapter in your ministry, who do *you* want to become? What expressions of Love do you want to incarnate in the here and now? Maybe something as simple as a Little Free Library or a Food Pantry outside our building. Or maybe something big, hairy and

⁴ [“Community Means Strength”](#), by Starhawk, *WorshipWeb*, UUA.

audacious, like becoming a youth centre for our wider community? This won't be my vision. It won't be the minister's vision to carry alone. It's incumbent on each of us to envision together where Love is leading for this next chapter of FirstU's story.

We are in a place of dreaming and imagining. While we don't know where the next years may take us, we do know this: As Unitarian Universalists, *Love calls us on*. To bring the Beloved Community here and now, it takes all of us doing what we can to make it so.

To close, I leave you with these three questions:

How will you do Beloved Community here and now?

What future might we weave together?

And lastly, what does Love ask of you, if you were to fully lean in?

Amen.