

Preparation for T351 — Belovedness

The Universalist strand of Unitarian Universalism historically believed that every person will go to heaven because a loving God would not condemn anyone to eternal damnation. Christians hold that everyone is a beloved child of God.

We Unitarian Universalists agree to disagree among ourselves and with other religious traditions about terms such as “God” and “belovedness,” thereby giving each of us the complicated privilege of defining these terms for ourselves and deciding how they figure into our personal faith.

In recent years, we at First Unitarian have heard a lot about “Beloved Community,” and some have expressed confusion about it. Read Rev. Nancy’s essay on the back of this sheet before you do the preparation, and take a look at the February newsletter (on the church website — <http://www.sanjoseuu.org/>) for more opinions about this topic. And, as always, remember that you do not have to answer every question below!

1. Talk about a time you have felt truly beloved.
2. Talk about a time when you had difficulty accepting that you could be beloved by others.
3. What or who are your “beloveds”?
4. How can we live as if we are all beloved?
5. How can we as a church community make everyone in the community feel beloved? How can we extend that into the world?
6. After reading Rev. Nancy’s essay on the reverse of this page, talk about what *you* see as the elements of a “beloved community”
7. This story from Noah Purifoy was recounted by a congregant on the recent worship theme survey: *“Every human being lives surrounded by sand and dirt and muck as well as beauty, joy and love. No matter how miserable the circumstances, during their life everybody is like an oyster, managing to create a pearl from the surrounding debris. Your challenge when meeting someone new is to uncover their pearl. Sometimes the pearl is obvious, but often it is buried deep.”* Talk about a time you were able to uncover a deeply buried pearl in someone else.

“Love Beyond Belief”: When a Community Learns How to Love

by Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

On a beautiful plot of land in Tulsa, Oklahoma, sits the largest Unitarian Universalist church in the United States. All Souls Unitarian Church, with a congregation of about 2,000 people, strives to live up to its vision: *“All Souls is a multicultural community of people who Love Beyond Belief. We express this in three ways: Connection, Compassion, and Courage.”*

Love Beyond Belief. It’s a great motto for a congregation where folks who identify as Universalist Unitarians (emphasis on the Universalist), Universalist Christians (emphasis on the Christian), Unitarian humanists, and many other varieties of religious and spiritual identity experience worship, learning, service, and action in one community. When coauthor Karin Lin and I visit All Souls in January, we watch congregants reach out across their theological, racial, and class differences to spend time with each other. We see them come together to learn about Tulsa’s troubled history and to show up for the Dr. Martin Luther King Day parade. Not everyone, of course, but a critical mass. Enough so that All Souls’ Love Beyond Belief—this progressive message so relevant to these times—is palpable.

When we here at First Unitarian of San José wonder what February’s theme “Belovedness” means, or when we puzzle over our frequent use of the term “Beloved Community,” I think first of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., of course. Dr. King takes the phrase Beloved Community from early-20th-century philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce and puts flesh on it. Dr. King envisions a worldwide community where the “Triple Evils” of racism, poverty, and militarism are defeated by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the principles and practices of nonviolence. In the Beloved Community, people share the earth’s wealth and resources (reversing economic inequality), recognize their common kinship (ending hierarchical systems like race and racism), and settle the inevitable conflicts through nonviolent, compassionate means, with reconciliation as the goal. Dr. King believes this vision is practical and attainable, not just some pie-in-the-sky dream.

Imagine the Love Made Visible, the Love Beyond Belief, the plain-and-simple muscular effective Love that would infuse our lives in such a Beloved Community. It’s hard work learning how to get there—but it would be so . . . stress-reducing! So creative. So affirming of each and every one of us. We would all feel beloved. We would let every person know how beloved they are. Surely it’s worth practicing building this kind of community.

So when I think about “Beloved Community” and “Belovedness,” I think not just about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., but also about the great experiments in community building that Karin and I experience at All Souls in Tulsa—and that I see growing right here at First Unitarian of San José.

Belovedness: yes, the word feels awkward at first, but when we practice it, it begins to thrum with rhythm.

Belovedness: it’s the ancient root of our Universalist faith springing up in sturdy 21st-century varietals.

Belovedness: it’s a 1960s song mixed with new energy, analysis, and longing.

Come experience your own belovedness with First Unitarian this February!

With my love,
Rev. Nancy