

## What is Prophetic Church? Holding Vision

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Our All Souls Vision Statement has a preamble that reads: *To build the Beloved Community, All Souls Church cultivates and celebrates...* The phrase *Beloved Community* comes from the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a vision he held and developed over time. Our readings come from his writing, in this third sermon on *What is Prophetic Church?* (From the first newsletter of the SCLC, 1957) *The ultimate aim of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is to foster and create the beloved community.*

(From "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 1956.) *Our world is geographically one. Now we are faced with the challenge of making it spiritually one. Through our scientific genius we have made of the world a neighborhood; now through our moral and spiritual genius we must make of it a brotherhood...We are all links in the great chain of humanity.*

(From "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," 1968.) *We must all learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.*

What does it mean to be *Beloved Community*, in a prophetic congregation? This is a phrase we often use in search of diverse, multicultural and multiracial institutions. We have chosen it to anchor our congregational vision, to hold fast to what we say we will become. The ideas in King's writings have a number of core concepts related to *Beloved Community*. Reading some of his speeches this week, I found the idea that struck me most was the concept of inter-dependence. Rev.

Dr. King preached oneness in the 1950's and 60's, long before widespread computer use, global Internet, cable television, or the UU 7<sup>th</sup> Principle of interdependent web of creation. He saw our humanness as interconnected--in the single garment of destiny, in the world as neighborhood, in the inescapable network of mutuality.

Yet within that human oneness there are individual experiences, concrete differences that may confuse, chafe and alienate. *We want to be the Beloved Community*, and still, we bump up against the hard edges of disappointment, the uncomfortable zones of distance. Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron calls this the big squeeze, the discrepancy between your inspiration and the situation as it actually presents itself. As she puts it,

*It's the rub between these two things—the squeeze between vision and reality—that causes you to grow up, to wake up to be 100 percent decent, alive, and compassionate. The big squeeze is one of the most productive places on the spiritual path.*

In order to hold true to our vision of *Beloved Community*, we say we both *celebrate* and *cultivate* our three goals. *We celebrate* because this kind of multiracial, multicultural space is rare and precious. *We celebrate* because this sort of community is essential to find the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to honor the internal spark of the divine. *We cultivate* because, well, it's hard to grow and transform. It's challenging to prepare the soil, plant the seeds, water the crops, weed, fertilize, weed again, water again, all the way to harvest. Our big squeeze is between the *celebration* of vision, and the reality of the tough work of *cultivation*. They rub against each other. Yet this *is* the place where we come alive, grow more compassionate, a productive place on the spiritual path.

An essential component of *cultivation* is learning that our personal view is only partial. We bring our individual lens to congregational life at All Souls. Your lens, and my lens, is constructed: by history, geography, education, ability, nationality,

orientation, age, ethnicity, race, culture, gender. We cultivate that deeper personal understanding. However, in our Vision Statement we say that we will put another *collective* lens over our individual glasses, as the outermost layer. It's like being at the optometrist's office when they keep swinging down those little metal and glass circles, as you squint at the eye chart through the big machine. The collective outer lens we choose is to *see* the *Beloved Community*. This doesn't only mean our individual and community calling to love each other more. We also affirm that each person who enters here is *already* beloved, by Spirit, by God, Universe, or Nature. The big squeeze is between the beloved-ness that already exists, and our seeking to know it better.

I thought about how we see on the "Highway to Heaven" recently, that stretch of New Hampshire Avenue in Montgomery County, MD with 34 houses of worship from every major faith. Here you view the Muslim Community Center, St. Andrew Ukrainian Orthodox, Transfiguration Episcopal, Our Lady of Vietnam Parish, several synagogues, La Iglesia de Gracia, Colesville Baptist, Seventh Day Adventists, the Cambodian Buddhist Temple, and the Silver Spring UU congregation, to name a few. It is a fact that all face New Hampshire Ave, and all are different.

Yet what if they each denied this common New Hampshire pathway? What if each congregation asserted that the view from inside their building was so particular that they refused to have any address at all? Or that the perspective from within their garden was so universal that they claimed all of New Hampshire Ave for their people alone? What if they asserted that they *owned* all New Hampshire Ave now, because they were so evolved and progressive. Hmm...that one sounds familiar! Each of these examples sounds far-fetched, yet this is exactly what we do to each other as individuals and faith communities. The beauty of this stretch of road is the diversity itself, the way the architecture and grounds vary, how the people who enter each place are different. Each view is only partial. It takes cultivation to know this, and celebration to preserve this.

There is one religion *not* represented on New Hampshire, which I'm going to use in an analogy about cultural viewpoint, so work with me here. There is a worldwide movement in English-language census responses, organizing to answer the question "What is your religion?" with the answer "Jedi." Yes, from the Star Wars films and books, as in the Jedi Warriors who say, *May the Force Be With You*. Obewan Kenobe, Yoda, Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader—you know the ones. While many folks are answering in jest, others are engaged in real spiritual and philosophical discussion online. Here are the numbers who answered Jedi on the census: 14,000 in Scotland; 55,000 in New Zealand; 70,000 in Australia; and in England and Wales: 390,000, the 4<sup>th</sup> largest religion, coming in ahead of Judaism and Buddhism! Over half a million people in total.

So let's say that the first Jedi walks into All Souls one Sunday, one we will call....Princess Leia. She hears the stirring words and music proclaiming *Beloved Community* and yet isn't sure if she belongs. She is not the only one wearing the long robes of the warrior, but there are very few here who do. Leia's light saber is fascinating to the kids, but more than one adult looks at this weapon with suspicion. She believes that the Force has a Dark Side and a Light Side, yet Unitarians seem to say it is neither good nor evil, all simply Spirit of Life. This is a term she hasn't heard before, so she feels unsure. In solidarity with her, an Adult Spiritual Development study group is formed to view the religious issues in Star Wars movies. Yet Leia says the warrior images can't be seen as representative of all Jedis. Whenever we want an "official" opinion on Jedi religion, hers is the lone voice and she gets tired of being the token. But Leia is used to living on the margins as one in a minority faith, and knows it will take time to integrate.

You see, we find the *Beloved Community* lens by truly learning about a completely different experience. With a Jedi warrior, we are well aware of our partial view. We may not be so aware if the one we encounter is transgender or poor, homeless or Christian—we might just be convinced we know them and see all. We can celebrate our All Souls Vision endlessly, but the big reality squeeze comes when

each person walks in the door. This may be the real and perhaps unsettling human being that causes us to grow up, to wake up to be 100 percent decent, alive, and compassionate.

Let me close with the words from the essay, *"What Will We Be and for Whom?"* in *A People So Bold*, written by All Souls congregant and UUA staff, Kat Liu:

*If it is our desire to be prophetic leaders in building a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural beloved community, we must step outside our culture-bound viewpoints, recognize that other equally valid viewpoints exist, and intentionally work to see through the eyes of others. Those among us who live on various margins have already had to learn to do this.*

*May we lead, not lag. May we reclaim the voice of our prophetic faith.*

May it be so at All Souls, as we hold fast to our vision. Amen.