

## The Alternate Metric

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*Text: A Kol Nidrei by Rev. Mark Belletini. (Note: Kol Nidre is both the opening prayer and the name for the evening service that begins Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which comes in the fall. It means "All Vows" and is a release of vows, a letting go. Kol Nidre was originally written and still recited in Aramaic. The beautiful melody has deep emotional impact and is a key element for observance of the High Holy Day in Judaism. This is an alternate Kol Nidrei, one that calls us to love each other and our selves. We are invited to remember the true measure of our worth).*

Our All Souls Vision Statement uses a famous phrase when it proclaims that we will “build Beloved Community.” We toss these words around frequently here, perhaps not always clear what they truly mean. We give the word wings, but might not know much about the roots. This morning, I’d like to offer some historical context for the phrase, and then focus on why it is central to Unitarian Universalism and this congregation. I chose this Sunday because thousands of UUs are now gathered in Charlotte at our General Assembly, the gathering where we annually hold up our highest ideals. And so, it’s a good moment to ask: what do we say is the heart of our faith and ethics? What is our good news message, pared down to the basics, at least from my perspective? What is Beloved Community, really, and why does it matter?

Travel back a century with me for a bit of history, and imagine a clandestine and somewhat risky meeting in Europe. In 1914, a group of 150 Christian pacifists met in Switzerland with an urgent goal: to prevent the outbreak of war in Europe. It was ironic that World War I actually broke out *as* they were meeting, and so they hastened home. But two of the participants, an English Quaker and a German Lutheran, made a fervent promise at a railway station to continue to work for peace. Many of their countries were

already fighting, but 68 people met again in Cambridge, England to form a new and radical community. They called it the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and their mission was creative non-violence through communities of all faiths. They were an alternate voice of conscience, a counter-cultural call for peace in wartime.

The next year, in 1915, the FOR-USA began. The Rev. John Haynes Holmes, was a Unitarian minister and one of the early FOR members. A committed pacifist, Rev. Holmes wryly noted that most people believe war is wrong in general, but nonetheless go on to justify each particular war! He wrote forcefully: “No one is wise enough, no nation is important enough, no human interest is precious enough, to justify the wholesale destruction and murder which constitute the science of war.” Holmes walked the walk of his talk, and left the American Unitarian Association in 1918 because it supported the US involvement in World War I. He founded what he said was a new kind of congregation, called Community Church in New York City, which is now Unitarian Universalist. It was then non-denominational, fully inclusive, and seeking social justice beyond any religious or government institutions. He created the place to build Beloved Community, although he never used that term.

The actual phrase, Beloved Community, originated with Prof. Josiah Royce, a Harvard philosopher of religion also active in the US Fellowship of Reconciliation. He was writing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about the central mission of religious community. Royce had a life-long debate going with a more known writer, William James, whom he thought over-emphasized that individuals could have extraordinary religious experience. Instead, Royce felt that religious meaning was *only* to be found in community. He called this concept various things: the Great Community, the Universal Community, or the community of expectation, memory and hope. Royce knew that doctrines and creeds could change over time, that religious institutions might identify themselves as churches, but not be what he called “congregations of grace”. Have you ever seen that before?! Hmmmm... What mattered most to him was *interpretation* of faith—the process of speaking to and understanding one another—in actual, imperfect communities.

According to Josiah Royce, a group of religious people could join together best in ideal universal vision, striving toward what he named as the Beloved Community.

You probably know the most famous member of the US Fellowship of Reconciliation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the Civil Rights Movement, King helped make Royce's term, Beloved Community, widely known in the US and beyond. He saw this community not as some idyllic utopian harmony where we all get along without effort, but rather, as a challenging, sometimes messy goal that could still be reached. King thought that conflict within the community was inevitable, yet possible to resolve in peaceful ways, through dialogue and reconciliation. Elements of his vision included a core commitment to nonviolence based on the principles of Gandhi, respect for all religious pathways, global sharing of wealth and resources, and of course, an end to all forms of bigotry and racism.

As early as 1956, Dr. King spoke of the Beloved Community as the ultimate goal of social justice action. Following the U.S. Supreme Court decision to desegregate the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, King wrote: "The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding good will that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age."

For over a century now, in a beloved community of reconciliation there has been a different measurement of a person's worth. The culture at large may count dollars and notice titles, emphasize resumes and powerful connections, make critical distinctions about theological categories or color of skin. In contrast, this new kind of community, the kind we strive towards at All Souls, calls every person "beloved." Every life is valuable, and too precious to treat as a commodity of war, or make a victim of neglect or injustice. This is an alternate metric, a counter-cultural assertion. Every person is beloved, part of the interdependent web, and embraced by what we call the great Spirit of Life. All are welcome at the table of all souls.

Which gets us back to Unitarian Universalism and our congregation. What is the good news message, pared down to the basics? When UUs talk about our first principle, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we are implicitly saying this word: beloved. By affirming the spark of the divine in every creature in our August animal blessing, we are saying, beloved. When we say each child is born is full of original blessing in a dedication ritual, we are saying, beloved. When we honor commitment in relationships, regardless of gender, we are saying, beloved. When we take UU denominational action on immigrant rights or ethical eating, when we stand on the side of love, we are saying, beloved. If we had to boil it all down, our seven UU principles, our many sources of faith and inspiration, we might just say one word of good news, beloved. And if we had to shrink our All Souls Vision Statement to a T-shirt slogan—our three goal areas of spirit-growing, connection-building, justice-seeking diverse church, all the measurable results we have for the next five years--we might just say, *Build Beloved Community*.

Mark Belletini is pointing to this alternate metric, this counter-cultural community in *A Kol Nidrei*. He urges deep relinquishing of internal and external fear, labels, and divisions. He tells us to let go of small things, in order to find the very large open silence where everything is possible.

*Let's set it all down, you and me. Let's open our fists and drop them. The obsession with what we cannot have. The pin-wheeling worry which wears us out.*

*Let's throw them down. The comparisons of ourselves with others. The competition, as if Domination was the best name we could give to God.*

*Let's drop them like hot rocks into the cool silence. Let's be supported in this still cradle of the world, new-born, ready for anything.*

In that alternate world, and in this congregation of All Souls, you are beloved.

Amen.