

A sermon for use by churches of the Rocky Mountain Conference on June 11, 2017, written by the Rev. Dr. David Bahr, Pastor, Park Hill Congregational UCC, Denver.

"Beloved Community. Believing Hope. Embodied Action."

Text: Genesis 1:1-2:4

Here is another retelling of the Creation story by Rabbi Marc Gelman in the book *Does God Have a Big Toe*:

Before there was anything there was God, a few angels, and a huge whirling swirling glob of rocks and water, in no particular order. The angels asked God, "Why don't you clean up this mess?"

So God collected rocks from the huge whirling swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, "Some of these clumps will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be... just rocks."

Then God collected water from the huge whirling swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, "Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will be clouds, and some these pools of water will be... just water."

The angels said, "Well, God... it's neater now. But is it done yet?" God answered, "Nope."

On some of the rocks God placed growing things and creeping things, and things only God knows what they are. And when God had finished doing all this, the angels asked, "Is it done yet?" "Nope."

God made some animals for the rocks and some swimming things for the water and then some humans by combing some water and stardust and told the humans, "I'm done. Please finish up the world for me. Really, it's almost done." But the humans protested: "*You* have the plans. We can't do this alone."

"Yes, you can," said God, "but I'll agree to this. You keep working on it and I'll be your partner."

The humans asked, "What's a partner?" God explained, "A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means you can never give up because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I'm not doing enough and on the days I think you're not doing enough, we keep working together. That's my offer. And they all agreed to the deal.

The angels asked God, "Is it done yet?" God answered, "I don't know. Go ask my partners."¹

Good morning Partners! How are we doing with this whole partnership enterprise? As we gather for worship today we are aware of our partners in ministry meeting as the Rocky Mountain Conference in Cheyenne, Wyoming, this morning. We remember that we are not alone but are among more than 70 faithful churches throughout Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming and nearly one million UCC members throughout the country.

As isolated as some of us are in our Conference – can you believe, our two most distant churches are 1,000 miles apart! As isolated as some of us are, it's important to remember that we are not alone. We may be distant in space, but we are close in spirit. Just like our original partner, God! God, too, is as vast as the Grand Canyon and as intimate as the bubbles that start at the headwaters of the Colorado River, 10,000 feet above the sea at La Pourde Pass.

The theme of the gathering of our clergy and lay delegates this weekend is *Beloved Community. Believing Hope. Embodied Action.*

We know of beloved community in this congregation. The rhythms and rituals from birth to death – from the joy of baptism to the hope of resurrection as we bury long faithful servants of the church. The potlucks. The Christmas pageants. Prayers for members who are sick or dying. (fill in your own examples.) We love the people in our churches.

But love sometimes seems like a distant memory in our country. We love, but too often it is only for those with whom we share a common point of view. Divisions – real and manipulated – cause us to disbelieve the intentions and motivations of once close neighbors, relatives, and friends. How do we create beloved community on a scale beyond our beloved local churches?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. popularized the idea of the Beloved Community. The King Center describes it this way:

Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. 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.

"Poverty, hunger, and homelessness will not be tolerated."

¹ Rabbi Marc Gelman, "Partners" from *Does God Have a Big Toe*, Harper Collins, 1989 – slightly adapted

Many of our Rocky Mountain Conference churches open their doors to those who are hungry and homeless.

- Some host community food banks in small towns, the only form of assistance for miles around.
- Some deliver sandwiches to people standing on street corners in cities like Salt Lake and Denver.
- Some of our churches act as overnight shelters, and,
- Some have welcomed refugee families.
- Many, if not most or even all of us partner with organizations that serve and feed the most vulnerable citizens. We collect offerings, we provide labor.

We take it seriously when Jesus told his followers that if they didn't serve those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, or in prison, they dishonor Jesus himself. We may not all agree about who or how this should be done, but no one wants to see a person suffer. Human decency demands it, not to mention Jesus Christ. And, after all, it was part of God's original intention at creation.

The second part of Dr. King's vision of the Beloved Community, however, may be more complicated – and has been since the founding of our country. *"Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood."*

We have good role models in the United Church of Christ.

- In 1839, members of both white and black Congregational Churches partnered together to care for captured Africans bound for slavery on the ship La Amistad. And beyond even that, to seek and finally gain their ultimate freedom.
- These brave folks went on to start the first integrated mission society – the American Missionary Association. Black and white in truly equal partnership, unlike anything of its kind in its day. Despite desperation for money, they refused donations from anyone whose profits were tainted by money gained off of slavery.
- Some of our members deliberately moved to Kansas to add to the population to prevent it from becoming a slave state – including the Andover Band, a group of theological students dedicated to ending slavery in 1857.

Damn Yankees wasn't just a musical but an epithet against Congregationalists who were known as rabid abolitionists.

How good it would be to hear those same words spoken against us today! How good it would be that we were so dedicated to the vision of the Beloved Community that people took notice. How good it would be that we were so dedicated to the end of *racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice* that we would be thorns in the side of the corporate body of our country. In fact, God would declare that not just good but "very good!"

Who could disagree with this? Yet, Dr. King despaired of those who agreed with this vision but refused to put their bodies – or reputations – on the line to achieve it. Sitting in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, he decried those who told civil rights leaders to go more slowly, to wait, to be patient so they wouldn't upset "unity." His critics in this instance didn't disagree about the fact of injustice. They believed racism was real. But felt doing too much about it was too divisive. Yet, the Beloved Community must be more than a feeling about it; we must have more than an opinion about it. The Beloved Community is found in action, but first it is found in hope. Action without hope is just busy work.

People throughout our country today are aching for hope. Are we ready to step up? The church knows hope because we deal with life from birth to death – with potlucks and pageants and prayers all the way in between. We know hope because we know God, who is not defined or confined to this present moment in history. We know despair, as well, because we too have gone through the darkest of our personal Good Fridays. But we hold on to hope because we know that the third day always comes. And because of that, we know that this present moment of disappointment in our fellow citizens and despair for the realization of the Beloved Community will pass into the history books.

Yet, in the meantime, real Christian hope won't allow some people to be left behind. So our part comes in the form of embodied action. Not on our shoulders alone, but in partnership with God – for truly, we need a partner in this venture. And remembering that though we may be isolated, we are not alone. We have each other in the UCC; we have each other's backs, whether we are a few blocks from another church or a thousand miles away.

The story said, "If you have a partner, it means you can never give up because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think *I'm* not doing enough and on the days I think *you're* not doing enough, we keep working together." Congregations of the Rocky Mountain Conference *are* beloved communities of hope in action.

In 1987, UCC folks – evangelicals and liberals and everyone in between – came together for a church-wide conference in Houston, Texas. It was a divided time in our church's history and they sought to find common ground. They drafted a UCC Statement of *Mission* – to supplement our Statement of Faith 30 years before. Not just what we believe but what we will do with our beliefs. This Statement of Mission was affirmed by General Synod 26 later that year.

It reads: As people of the United Church of Christ, we seek [as partners] within the Church Universal to participate in God's mission and to follow the way of the crucified and risen Christ.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are called and commit ourselves:

- To praise God, confess our sin, and joyfully accept God's forgiveness;
- To proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our suffering world;
- To embody God's Love for all people;
- To hear and give voice to creation's cry for justice and peace;
- To name and confront the powers of evil within and among us;
- To repent our silence and complicity with the forces of chaos and death;
- To preach and teach with the power of the living Word;
- To join oppressed and troubled people in the struggle for liberation;
- To work for justice, healing, and wholeness of life;
- To embrace the unity of Christ's church;
- To discern and celebrate the present and coming reign of God.

That's quite a calling! And never more needed than today. There's something for each of us in there. So, Good morning Partners! Let us be a *Beloved **Community**. Believing in **Hope**. Embodied in **Action**.*