



Soul Matters

**What does it mean to be a people of
BELOVED COMMUNITY?**

Small Group

February 2021

What Does It Mean To Be A People of Beloved Community?

Henri Nouwen, the treasured catholic teacher, activist and pastor, once described beloved community as “the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.”

On its surface it seems to be a straightforward reminder not to expect perfection from the communities we join. And not to expect perfection from others. Indeed, it’s a plea to stick with those troublesome others. Forgive them. Accept them. Stay open to the whole of who they are, not just the caricatured sliver of them that makes it easy to write them off.

Besides the obvious calls to commitment, conflict resolution and hard work, there’s also a hidden call to hope woven into Nouwen’s words. To stay in community with difficult or offensive people, we have to hold on to the hope that they can change and grow. We have to believe that their better selves exist and will eventually show up. We have to have faith that giving them the benefit of the doubt is worth it. That assuming their good intentions isn’t foolish.

It’s a tall order. This kind of hopefulness and generosity toward others is not easy.

But here’s the catch, Nouwen doesn’t stop there. Right after that first sentence he adds another. Here’s the whole quote:

“Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives...That person is always in your community somewhere; in the eyes of others, you might be that person.”

Ouch! Nouwen doesn’t pull his punches. Just when we were starting to feel good about being the ones who are magnanimous with these annoying and offensive folks, Nouwen reminds us that we are actually among them! But don’t get so caught up in this message of humility that you miss how Nouwen is also using this to call us to an even greater hopefulness.

By adding us to the mix of the unwanted, he’s pointing out that beloved community requires us to believe not only that others are worth our effort but also that we will be worth the effort in the eyes of others!

It’s an insight that we must not miss this month. We human beings run away from community not just because others let us down, but also because we doubt that others won’t step up when we let them down. Beloved community stays at arm’s length not just because it is hard to build, but also because we don’t trust that it will be there for us.

It’s all one big reminder that the work of beloved community is bigger than we usually imagine. It’s not just about building a better world; it’s also about building up each other’s faith. We are in a battle not just against the division between us, but also the doubt within us.

What we really need to hear about beloved community is not just that we can create it, but that we can count on it.

This month, may we make sure we all bless each other with both of those messages.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

What's Your Fig Tree Story?

The poet Ross Gay offers us one of the most beautiful stories about everyday Beloved Community with his poem *To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian*. For your spiritual exercise, simply listen to him read it (maybe a couple of times) and let it take you back to your own “fig tree story.” Come to your group ready to share your fig tree story, as well as why it has such a special place in your heart. (Maybe even write a poem about it!)

Here's Gay reading his poem: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aT0A28IW7E>

Option B

Allow a Movie to Become a Meditation

Movies and the stories they contain allow us to engage challenging topics in ways that analytical essays and instructive quotes just can't. That is certainly true with this month's theme of Beloved Community. So this month, make movie-watching your spiritual exercise.

But here's the catch, as you watch or after you are done watching, identify the one scene that engaged you the most. And then spend some time reflecting on it, digging into its personal meaning/message for you. Is there a challenge in it for you? An insight? An invitation? A message of healing?

What “Beloved Community movie” should you watch? Glad you asked. Here are a bunch to choose from:

- [And Breathe Normally](#)
- [Selma](#)
- The Hate U Give
- 12 Years a Slave
- [Thirteenth](#)
- Crash
- Moonlight

Option C

When Our Backpacks Get in the Way of the Journey

This spiritual exercise is for the white people among us.

It can sometimes help to think of ourselves as journeying toward Beloved Community, never quite arriving but step by step getting closer. In her widely honored essay, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh helps us see that the length and difficulty of the Beloved Community journey is not the only challenge we face. It's also about those unnoticed things we carry in our backpacks. She writes, "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks... [So] I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life." McIntosh's self-examination led to her sharing a long list of all the ways white privilege shows up in her life.

So, for your spiritual exercise this month, take up McIntosh's work and apply it to yourself.

- First, read her article: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf>
- Second, go through her list and spend some time thinking about how the items in her backpack also show up in yours.
- Then, and most importantly, identify and commit to removing 2-3 of the items from your own backpack/list. Awareness is a big part of the work, but it's obviously not enough.
- Finally, come to your group ready to share your journey.

Here are some extra resources to help you as you dig into the work:

- **White Power And Privilege: A UUA Curriculum Exercise**
https://www.uua.org/files/documents/gardinerwilliam/whiteness/power_privilege.pdf
- **Who Invented White People, Dr. Gregory Jay**
http://uuwhiteness.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/READING_Who-Invented-White-People.pdf
- **What Is Whiteness?, Nell Irvin Painter**
http://uuwhiteness.us/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/READING_What-Is-Whiteness-The-New-York-Times.pdf
- **Learning to be White, John Odell**
<https://www.pbs.org/video/how-do-you-experience-race-17341/>
Discovering Whiteness: A Personal Story
<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/btwdda/workshop9/discovering-whiteness>
- **Digging Deeper into White Privilege: A Congregational View**
<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/btwdda/workshop5/166136.shtml>

Option D

Find Beloved Community in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of Beloved Community. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself. So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month. Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of Beloved Community. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can

continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every single one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? What is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Give it a try! Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with! So why not give it a try and ask them which they think is "your question"?!

1. What was your first experience of Beloved Community?
2. Who taught you the most about creating Beloved Community?
3. Has the distinction between "community" and "beloved community" been important to your spiritual path/sensibility?
4. What do you think is the most unrecognized impediment/threat to Beloved Community?
5. It's said that Beloved Community isn't about the absence of conflict, but the willingness to stay at the table and work through it. What has been your best strategy for staying at the table? What practice or wise words keep you from running (or attacking) when things get hard?
6. How well are you doing at staying at your current table of conflict? What grade would you give yourself?
7. What is your first response when you hear the call to "Love your enemy"?
8. What does "loving your enemy" mean for your right now?
9. [Ibram X. Kendi](#) writes, "One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist. There is no in-between safe space of "not racist"." Looking back, how were you first taught that the space of "not racist" was real?
10. It's said that Beloved Community requires us to "[get proximate to the marginalized](#)." What are you learning about the "right" and "wrong" way of doing that?
11. How are you healing from having your hopes for Beloved Community dashed?
12. What one new commitment will you make this year to build Beloved Community?
13. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining what it means to be a people and a person of Beloved Community.

Word Roots & Definitions

We get the word love through Germanic *lubo* which includes the experience of joy, as in jubilation. Community has its roots in Latin *communi*, common, shared by all or many. Through all the ups and downs of being in community, can we still come together and share the simple joy of being together?

[Source](#)

Wise Words

Speaking to his supporters at the end of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, Martin Luther King Jr. declared that their common goal was not simply the end of segregation as an institution. Rather, he said, “Our ultimate end must be reconciliation; the end must be redemption; the end must be the creation of the beloved community. We have before us the glorious opportunity to inject a new dimension of love into the veins of our civilization. The type of love that I stress here is not eros, a sort of esthetic or romantic love; not philia, a sort of reciprocal love between personal friends; but it is agape which is understanding goodwill for all... It begins by loving others for their sakes and makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed.

Nelson Mandela

The goal [of Beloved Community] is reconciliation, not to destroy your opponent, nor cast them out, but to stay in the struggle till love wins.

[Rev. Victoria Safford](#)

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

[The 8th Principle](#)

If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

Mother Teresa

Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.

bell hooks, Killing Rage: Ending Racism

In my vision of a beloved community, I see a dazzling, light-filled, breathtakingly beautiful mosaic, a gigantic, all-encompassing mosaic, where each of us can see, can really see, and deeply appreciate each piece. We know that each piece is of immeasurable value. We know that each piece is part of a larger whole, a larger whole that would not be whole, indeed would not BE, without each piece shining through, and being seen and appreciated as its unique self.

Marla Scharf, *First Unitarian Church of San Jose, California.*

Oftentimes, we say you gotta be in proximity with each other. You gotta be friends. You gotta sit at a table together. White folks need to take a step back instead of seeking out that friend, that person who's going to teach them. They should seek out education, seek out books, seek out spaces where people of color are willing to talk, seek out the lecture, seek out the class, seek out the book studies. Seek out the spaces where people of color have already agreed to share their stories with you. That way when you come into proximity with people of color, you will have a larger foundation to build a relationship as opposed to using me as your teacher. The goal of our friendship shouldn't be for me to be your teacher. It should be me as your friend. [Austin Channing Brown](#)

...I'm sick of filling in your gaps
Sick of being your insurance against
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people
Find another connection to the rest of the world
Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip...
From, [The Bridge Poem](#), by Donna Kate Rushin

My work with the poor and incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

[Bryan Stevenson](#)

There is nobody in this country who got rich on their own. Nobody. You built a factory out there-- good for you. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to

educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory... Now look. You built a factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea--God bless! Keep a hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.

Senator Elizabeth Warren

Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.

[Ta-Nehisi Coates](#)

You can always figure out who is executing the system. It appears that almost everybody's executing it, even you are executing it until you are actively fighting it.

Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder, Sweet Honey in the Rock

Fundamentally racism—its heartbeat—has always been denial. And the sound of that heartbeat has always been “I'm not racist.” To be more specific, the sound of that heartbeat has always been “not racist.” And so in writing *How to be an Antiracist*, I've had one singular goal. If I could somehow shape the world, what I would hope would come out of this book is very simply we would eradicate the term “not racist” from the American vocabulary. And then it would force people to recognize that they're either what? Racist or anti-racist.

It would force Americans... to recognize that all policies are either racist or anti-racist... All ideas are either racist or anti-racist. Then we can truly have an accounting of ourselves, of our ideas, of our policies, and of our country. Because at some point we are going to have to stop denying that we have metastatic racism. Because if you didn't already know, it is literally killing America. It is literally killing this world.

[Ibram X. Kendi](#)

What is perhaps most important for whites to acknowledge and understand is indifference. A great deal of what is often characterized as racism

can be more precisely and usefully described as indifference. Perhaps no other feature of white attitudes... is as cumulatively responsible for the pain and privation experienced by our nation's black minority as is indifference. And at the same time, perhaps no feature is as misunderstood or overlooked.

[Paul Wachtel](#)

There is a danger, in issue-oriented groups not based on community, that the enemy is seen as being the one outside of the group. The world gets divided between "the good" and "the bad." We are among the good; the others are the bad. In issue-oriented groups, the enemy is always outside. We must struggle against all those who are outside of our group, all those who are of the other party.

True community is different because of the realization that the evil is inside-- not just inside the community, but inside me. I cannot think of taking the speck of dust out of my neighbor's eye unless I'm working on the log in my own. Evil is here in me. Warfare is inside my own community, and I am called to be an agent of peace there. Warfare is also in me and I am called to seek wholeness inside of myself. Healing begins here, in myself. Wholeness and unity begin inside of myself.

Jean Vanier, From Brokenness to Community

The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Community is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another. Community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own. The question, therefore, is not 'How can we make community?' but, 'How can we develop and nurture giving hearts?'

Henri Nouwen

To be fully seen by somebody, and then loved anyhow—that is a human offering that can border on miraculous.

Elizabeth Gilbert

What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.

[Kurt Vonnegut](#)

What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?

George Eliot

We are called to be persons who embody hope for one another.

Paul J. Wadell

Music

We create two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. We organize these lists as a journey of sorts. So consider listening from beginning to end and using the lists as musical meditations. Follow the links below to connect with this month's Beloved Community playlists.

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Beloved Community](#).

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on Beloved Community.

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian, Ross Gay

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aT0A28IW7E>

Compassion and Kinship, Fr Gregory Boyle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipR0kWt1Fkc>

"How can we achieve a certain kind of compassion that stands in awe of what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgement at how they carry it. For the measure of our compassion lies not in our service of those on the margins but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them... That's what we want to achieve, this sense of mutuality, where we obliterate once and for all the

illusion that we are separate. No us and them. Just us..."

Closing Ceremony on Black Lives UU at UUA General Assembly 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKUaO4EBjQ8&t=3611s>

One Human Family

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhU5JEd-XRo&feature=emb_logo

The Star Spanglish Banner, Angelica Maria

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZFGXbO7y7I>

Video - 4 Rules [practices] For Achieving Peace and Justice [beloved community] - Bryan Stevenson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vI7UPuCUrE>

- #1 - get proximate to the marginalized
- #2 - change the narrative from one of fear and anger
- #3 - stay hopeful about creating justice, even when it's complicated
- #4 - be willing to do uncomfortable things

The Future of Race in America

Michelle Alexander

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ6H-Mz6hgw>

Finlandia by Jean Sibelius -- Cantus

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuXrFZBforA&fbclid=IwAR1hhSP-5p42tcaT1nzD5sHezQnPe3mY2N7bIJavQHck_KkHgK_S81RhGksU

James Baldwin & Nikki Giovanni, a conversation

One of the most brilliant and important conversations you will ever have the privilege of listening in on.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZmBy7C9gHQ>

Video - Racial Wealth Gap

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mqrhn8khGLM&feature=emb_logo

Articles

Selma's Challenge

Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/selmas-challenge>

How the GI Bill's Promise Was Denied to a Million Black WWII Veterans

<https://www.history.com/news/gi-bill-black-wwii-veterans-benefits>

Related article:

<https://www.hivelearning.com/site/racism-in-housing/>

The End of iChurch

Rev. Fredric Muir

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/end-ichurch>

"For most of UU history, we have lived the story of the iChurch. But knowing ourselves as beloved communities is a story the world awaits—and if not the world, then at the very least those who ache and yearn for what we can be..."

Books

The Warmth of Other Suns; The Epic Story of America's Great Migration

Isabel Wilkerson

Review:

https://www.journeywithjesus.net/BookNotes/Isabel_Wilkerson_The_Warmth_Of_Other_Suns.shtml

Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America

Ibram X. Kendi

How To Be an Antiracist

Ibram X. Kendi

White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide

Carol Anderson

The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race

Jesmyn Ward

Bailey's Cafe: A Novel

Gloria Naylor

Movies

- [And Breathe Normally](#)
- [Selma](#)
- The Hate U Give
- 12 Years a Slave
- [Thirteenth](#)
- Crash
- Moonlight

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).



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