

Matthew 22:34-40
Color Courageous Community
February 11, 2024
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

This series, based partially on a billboard I saw in Tulsa claiming “Jesus ain't woke,” has included maybe more statistics than you needed, but also stories of the ways in which racism impacts people of color every single day. I hope as we have batted around the word woke, and how it is being used, you have seen that whether we want to use the word woke to describe Jesus or not isn't really the point. The point is that Jesus was aware of, cared about, and worked to do something about the suffering that existed in the 1st-century Roman Empire. And I hope that as you learned or were reminded of the myth of equality in our nation, the reality of unconscious bias, and the impact of racial trauma, you have been inspired to follow Jesus' ways of compassion and justice in this time and place. Our willingness, as individuals and as a community, to do so is truly a matter of life and death for people in marginalized communities. As I said last week, we must start writing a new story with a better ending than the one we are currently writing.

Now, we come to the end of the series, so it seems fitting to talk about our hope for how this story will end. Throughout the series, I've woven in some of Dr. Martin Luther King's words. From the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, his work was oriented toward creating a community characterized by love and justice, a society completely integrated, a vision he called “the Beloved Community.” Ending the segregation of our schools, libraries, public facilities, and services and promoting equality through legislation was just the beginning because we know that laws can correct housing, education, and employment injustices, but laws did not, cannot, and will not change our hearts and minds. It is those changes that will create the kind of community Dr. King talked about and dreamed about.

The legislative and political work toward full integration continues; within communities of color, the shouts and pleas for equity and a level playing field across the board remain, and at times, it feels like they remain largely unheard by the people in power and the people who vote the people into positions of power, people like you and me. There is still more to do. The church's work toward the Beloved Community also continues, and we cannot give up hope that it will come to be one day. It is important to note that our focus throughout this series has been on racism and its impact on communities of color but the work for this whole-hearted integration in both society and church must also include the ones excluded by gender, disabilities, sexual orientation, and any difference the people in power decide to exploit.

Friends, Jesus paid much too high a price for us to pick and choose who should be included.

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The essence of Beloved Community is that everyone is included. That is what we are called to create as followers of Jesus, as people who gather every week for communion that asks us to remember the story of Jesus eating with one who would betray him, one who would three times deny him, and the rest who were honestly pretty clueless. Dear ones, if Jesus can do that, we can surely manage to include the ones who make us uncomfortable, who have offended us, and who also seem clueless.

So, how do we do that? It's really pretty simple.

This is Matthew 22:34-40.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Aaaaahhh, yes, the Golden Rule. Simple, but not easy. My experience is that we like to quote this text when we are trying to teach children to treat their friends the way they want to be treated. But we don't like it so much when we are called upon to treat grown-ups the way we want to be treated. And I get it...we think grown-ups ought to know better. Well, we should, but our actions say otherwise. We think we shouldn't have to tell grown-ups how to act; we shouldn't. Just as we teach our children how to act by showing them, we can teach grown-ups that there is another way to be in this world. But the only way to teach it is to live it.

Loving other people isn't easy because sometimes people can act in ways that make loving them hard. But the kind of love Jesus was talking about when he said to love our neighbors as ourselves isn't about how we feel about someone. It is about how we act. Theologian Jim Palmer, wrote, "Telling people God loves them is good theology. Showing people that you love them is what transforms the world." And that begins with loving people enough to tell them our truth, the truth about who we are and what we believe about human beings, the planet, and the other creatures we share this earth with. And we must listen when they tell us their truth. In the end, the truth about who I am and what I believe isn't right or wrong; it is real. The same is true for you. Your truth about who you are and what you believe isn't right or wrong; it is real. We can love each other and disagree. We can love each other and not have to be declared the winner or the one who is most right. Again, love is about the way we act, not about the way we feel.

Friday night, I watched the news, and a news anchor interviewed Senator John Fetterman from Pennsylvania. He was asked about his position on Israel, which differs from President Biden's position. The news anchor said, "So, are you saying the

President is wrong?" The Senator said, "No, I am saying we disagree." To me, that was the most remarkable part of the interview. Right there on national TV one of our leaders didn't have the need to be right. But he did have every right to say what he believes. I've told you before that my brother and I disagree about the place of firearms in this nation. We have discussed it from every angle possible. We really could not be farther apart on this issue. As we ended one particularly vigorous discussion, he said something I will never forget. He said, "Kelley, I don't agree with anything you've said, but I do know the world needs people like you." And the world needs people like my brother, too. The world needs people like you. And the world needs people like the person or people in your life who disagree with you, say things you find offensive, and even vote differently. There are times when everyone knowing you are right is important...like if you work for NASA or if you are doing brain surgery.

What I have learned is that it isn't important for me personally to be right about guns. I would trade being right for a real solution any day. What is important is that we talk to each other and create a world in which people stop shooting other people. That is the thing that is right. If we are to create Beloved Community, we have to get to the place where we recognize that everyone we meet has something to contribute.

We talk about the kin-dom of God around here a lot. Beloved Community is one aspect of the kin-dom of God. Specifically, the focus of Beloved Community is on how diverse groups of people interact with each other in the world. In her book, *Color-Courageous Discipleship*, Michelle T. Sanchez writes about the obstacles to Beloved Community, the things that keep us from interacting with love and compassion with people who are different from us. She cites the research of Ibram X. Kendi in his book, *How to Be an Antiracist*, he writes, "The source of racist ideas is not ignorance and hate, but self-interest."¹ Truthfully, that is source of all sin, right? If sin is a break in relationship, then it makes sense that self-interest is the culprit. To be clear, self-interest is not the same as self-care. We all need to take care of ourselves. Self-interest is the pursuit of what I want, the pursuit of my interests, with little or no regard for the interests of others and how my actions impact others. Self-interest, then, is the opposite of Beloved Community.

And self-interest compels us to be afraid. We are afraid we won't get what we need or want. We are afraid of being irrelevant or misunderstood, or excluded. So, we hold tightly to what we need and trample others to ensure we get what we want. We operate under a zero-sum paradigm in which someone else's gain must mean our loss. If "they," whoever "they" is, get more, then I will get less. But that is not how it works. How it really works is that when marginalized communities fare better, we all fare better. When people around you are happy, you are happy. Or at least I hope so. I have said before that I cannot be whole; we cannot be whole if our neighbors are not.

¹ Kendi, Ibram X., *How to Be an Antiracist*, (One World: New York, 2019), 230.

You may be wondering what the cure for fearful self-interest is. Any ideas? Love. Love your neighbor as yourself. It probably seems like I am talking in circles. I am. All roads lead to love. That's how we worship God. That's how we turn from our sins. That's how we create Beloved Community and that is how the kin-dom of God grows. Not because we all believe the same things but because the ways of God become our ways. And what are the ways of God rooted in? Yes, love.

After last week's sermon, in which I said that everyone is beloved by God, several of you connected with me and had the same question. "How do I talk to people I care about who disagree with me on really important issues?" Some of you told me that there are people in your life whose words and actions make you feel less than beloved which makes it hard to treat them as beloved as you try to talk with them about important things like racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, politics, and religion. So, in a nutshell, how do we have difficult conversations as we try to create Beloved Community?

First, you are beloved; their words and actions don't change that.

Second, loving people is not about feeling warm and fuzzy toward people. It is about how we act. So, be truthful and recognize that the goal is not to get the other person to declare you "right." The goal is to be truthful about who you are and what you believe.

Third, I don't remember where I read this, but I think it's true. The difficult conversations we want to have are difficult because they are unpracticed. Recognize that it won't go perfectly, but the only way to practice is to have them. So here we go:

Note that I spent time trying to frame this so that these bullet points would spell BELOVED.

Take a page from Ted Lasso's book, as you prepare for the conversation:

Be curious

Do some research. Pay attention to perspectives that are different from yours, not to "arm" yourself, but to try to understand what people who disagree with you are afraid of.

Expect to learn. Expect that when you have the conversation, you will learn something from that person. Do not expect that you are going to "school" them. If we believe every person is made in the image of God, we must believe that every person has something to teach us about God.

When the conversation begins,

Listen. Really listen to what they are saying to you. Are they fearful, angry, sad, defensive? Listen. Try not to be thinking about how you will respond. You already know how you feel and what you want to say. So, let that be and just listen.

While you are listening,

Observe the person's body language. Yes, have these unpracticed conversations in person if possible. Social media is not the place. Messenger and texting are not the places. The most hurtful feedback I have ever received from a congregation member was sent via text. I think that's why it was so hurtful. So, you are mad at me and you won't even take the time to come and tell me how you feel? That's not okay. Incidentally, that was not from a member of this church. As you observe the person you are talking to notice: Are they tense? On the edge of their seat? Avoiding eye contact? Have they moved away from you? All of these things are clues about what they are feeling.

When the person has said what they want to say,
Voice your perspective. Why is this important to you? What are you afraid of/mad about? Who, besides you, is being impacted? What actions and words has the other person shown you that make this conversation important to the relationship?

After you have said what you need to say,
Engage one another. Ask questions, clarify, and be sure you leave the conversation knowing their perspective and make sure they know yours. Try not to be disappointed that y'all disagree. Starting the conversation is what's important.
And last,
Demonstrate a willingness to continue the conversation, to think about what's been said, to stay in relationship even though you disagree, and to continue to work toward the Beloved Community you want to see. Invite the other person to let you know if they have questions and ask if you can do the same.

There is a lot more to say about how to create Beloved Community, but talking to each other is the way to start. Making up our minds that we are going to try to love like Jesus did is a start. Sometimes, these unpracticed conversations will fail to go well. Some will go badly. Sometimes, the person you want to talk to isn't ready. You can't fix that. We must recognize that we are in our "already but not yet era." What I mean by that is everything we need to create Beloved Community is already here. We even see glimpses of it every now and then. But Beloved Community is not pervasive. That is our work to do.

Let me end with this: One of the critiques of this church (and me) is that the theology taught here is bad because it is all about love. People who criticize this say there is more to being a Christian than just loving people. No, there isn't. It really is that simple. Love God by loving yourself, others, and this planet. In a sermon I wrote while I was still in IL, I was preaching about hospitality to immigrants. In that sermon, I said what is printed on the plaque sitting next to the communion table, "Again and again, we are asked to decide what kind of nation/people we want to be. I would like to be the kind that clings to compassion rather than fear, and I would rather die because I loved 'the wrong people' than live afraid of everyone who is different from me. As we

draw borders and walls, God weeps.” Beloveds, we have got to be the people who choose love. Amen.