

At the Center or the Margins
UUF

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You've just heard MLk's definition of the Beloved Community. In one form or another my professional life has been grounded in helping to create the Beloved Community. During my younger years I believed it was possible to achieve in my lifetime. I no longer believe that. But I remain committed to the work of helping to create it. It's an issue of morality. It's the right thing to do.

The Beloved community is one in which we are all accepted and loved. Loved not in the romantic or sexual sense, or even close, dear friendship. Brotherhood/sisterhood is the love Jesus spoke of in the New Testament, to love thy neighbor. It's the kind of love captured in the Greek term, *agape*.

It is distinguished from other types of love by its lofty moral nature. It's a motivation for action and must be chosen. *Agape* is a sacrificial love that voluntarily suffers inconvenience, discomfort, and maybe even death for the benefit of others without expecting anything in return. *Agape* love requires an act of will and is shown by what it does.

So that's the Beloved Community I strive for, work for, live for and envision. What I want to focus on this morning is what keeps us from achieving that type of community. I want to delve into the concepts/ideas and thoughts that drive the behaviors that are counter to those of *agape* love.

I want us to look at these things, not for some idealistic or politically correct reason, but because I believe these things directly affect our ability to be faithful to what we as UUs say we believe. I want to move us away from mere beliefs to the "acts of will" that are required to manifest our beliefs.

I'm going to address this territory by using terms and concepts we all understand. After we gain some clarity about definitions, I want to then talk about how these concepts get played out in our everyday relationships, our everyday lives and in society at large.

Let's start with a piece of paper. That piece of paper has a center...the center may be a small spot centrally located or it can take up most of that sheet of paper. Then there are the margins of the paper---we all know the margins are on the edge, the outside, the extremes of the paper. Neither the center nor the margins describe the full sheet of paper, only parts of the whole. I want you to think of that full piece of paper as the Beloved Community.

Now I want to show how the center and the margins carry inherent or implicit meaning that gets played out in our everyday lives.

Imagine I'm sitting in my back yard, it's summer time, and I find myself the source of interest for a mosquito. When it lands on me, I do what most of us would do, swat it. Not wave at it, but swat it, with an intention to kill.

In this scenario, conceptually, I am the center of the paper. Me and my want for comfort is the center of concern. The mosquito represents the margins. My center of concern is manifested by my behavior. And I feel wholly justified in wanting to kill that mosquito.

In this scenario, I have privileged my comfort over the life of that mosquito. I have privileged my wants and concerns over that mosquito's role in the unfolding of the universe and its place in the interconnected web of existence.

You might think this is an inconsequential issue to be concerned about. But others, maybe a Buddhist, might say, "BUT Life Matters", and they'd have a worthy position to defend. Choosing to kill a mosquito or not, is how a concept, a belief, gets manifested. Very often, our behavior reflects little or no concern for what can be defined as on the margins of our lives.

This dynamic plays out every day in our society. We kick the homeless off the park bench, out of the doorway of closed businesses, off of city streets, in some places placed on buses and driven out of town...because we privilege our visual comfort and a sense of order over the lives and needs of the downtrodden; our wants over the worth and dignity of someone else.

We've just learned the Wells Fargo bank, created unauthorized accounts for its existing customers, by the thousands. They then charged them fees after having violated them!

How could such a thing happen....except as a result of a **belief** in profits over honesty, **combined** with the **power** to achieve its ends? The belief in profits uber alles is insufficient by itself. It requires the **behavioral willingness** to put that belief into effect, the will to act on that belief.

Also in the news of late were a couple court cases where white men got shockingly short sentences for rape or sexual abuse of women. (After tremendous negative feedback one judge has agreed to no longer hear such cases) At the center of those judges' analysis were concerns for the future careers of those men. Their careers and well-being were privileged. On the margin was consideration for the broken psyches and defiled bodies of the women.

Behind such decisions are concepts and beliefs that place boys and men's interests at the center. (No doubt, connected to the notion of men as breadwinner, and protector, a vaulted position in our society).

It privileges the lives of males. It's called sexism. Sexism is the manifestation, the behavioral consequences of such beliefs and concepts. This is true even when these concepts and beliefs exist outside of our awareness. These beliefs, when manifested, privileges males over females. They place maleness at the center of the conversation and marginalize the wants, needs and concerns of females. Males receive advantages, females are thereby disadvantaged.

This starts at an early age. The culture socializes these concepts into existence. No doubt, this occurs less now than in years gone by, but it is still very much alive and present. Boys are trained to be tough, girls soft and caring. Boys are to be assertive, even aggressive; girls are to be polite and demure.

I'm not telling you anything new. We all know this stuff. But I want to reframe it. I want to reorient us to the concepts of centering and marginalization; centering as advantage, marginalizing as disadvantage; birthright vs restriction; franchisement vs disenfranchisement.

WHY am I focused on centering and marginalizing? First, because these distinctions do not exist within the Beloved Community. There is no us and them. There is only you, me and we. There is no center. There are no margins. There is only the sheet of paper called we, the community. Where everyone must feel at home; recognized as having inherent worth and dignity.

Why #2 Because I believe Unitarian Universalism requires it of us. We, as a congregation have a covenant with our denomination, which reads in part: WE THE MEMBER CONGREGATIONS OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION, COVENANT TO AFFIRM AND PROMOTE: THE INHERENT WORTH AND DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON; JUSTICE, EQUITY AND COMPASSION IN HUMAN RELATIONS; THE GOAL OF WORLD COMMUNITY WITH PEACE, LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL...and RESPECT FOR THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB OF ALL EXISTANCE...

WHY #3 Because there are those among us, within this congregation, who have recently begun to talk about putting up a Black Lives Matters banner. And I've been asked to let the congregation know that that conversation has begun. So far, to my knowledge, the conversation has been limited and has taken place primarily among those associated with the Social Justice committee.

I don't know where that conversation will go. I don't even know if more than the few people who've raised the subject will engage the conversation. But what I do know, is the decision to put up a Black Lives Matter banner in front of the Fellowship has to be a congregation-wide decision. It is not a decision that can be made by just a few....the implications and ramifications of putting up that banner are much too large for that.

I also know, that nationally, the Black Lives Matter movement can be contentious. We therefore have to have a context within which to have that conversation, where everyone needs to feel they are included in both the conversation and the decision.

We'll need to do our homework and become educated on the subject, if we are to have real engagement with the subject. We'll need to understand what that phrase really means. We'll need to understand the Black Lives Matter movement within the context of our culture and societal norms. We'll need to understand the movement within the context of Unitarian Universalism.

But perhaps most importantly, we'll need to understand the words, Black Lives Matter within the context of whiteness and blackness within our society, within the context of who and what is at the center of the conversation and who or what is on the margins.

As our current presidential election process has demonstrated, issues of inclusion and exclusion, issues of race and racism, law and order, civility and incivility, have all been front and center. These issues are very alive within our culture today...and I would argue have been since before the birth of our nation.

If I had the power, I would assign as required reading Ta-Nehisi Coates, seminal work, "Between the World and Me". This book, more than anything I have ever read, brings what has historically been on the margins to the center of the conversation.

Since I can't assign required reading, I strongly encourage you to read this book. To support you, I will purchase a number of them and have them in my office for you to sign out and borrow. But my guess is you'll probably want to own your own copy so you can underline and write in the margins like I've done.

I am absolutely convinced, we can not make real progress towards achieving the Beloved Community until we've adequately addressed issues of race in America. Having a big-picture perspective, and having worked on issues of race and racism most of my life, I'm also convinced, issues of racial disparity can serve as a metaphor for all the ills of our country.

One last thing...and I know most folks say that and then keep going... but I will stop after I tell you this one last thing.

The concept of "Center and Margins", is the best framework I have found to address issues of inherent worth and dignity, justice equity and compassion in human relations and the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

I hope you will find it a helpful concept too.

Blessings, ashay, amen and Namaste.