

***Becoming the Beloved Community***  
**Psalm 40 1 Corinthians 1:1-9**  
**January 19, 2020 Human Relations Day**

Tomorrow we celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. You may have noticed that I borrowed the term, *the beloved community*, from him. He had a dream, quite a dream, that we could and would build a community, a nation in which all people are equal, all people have the opportunity to live fully into the promise of who they are and who they might be. Sometimes we may think that we are almost there, that we are getting close, but there are still so many things that get in the way of this dream. Dr. King's dream did not come out of thin air. It wasn't just some concept he conjured up in order to get people excited. The Reverend Dr. King was a preacher, so he was familiar with the scriptures, familiar with Jesus' teachings. His dream has its roots in God's Word and in God's own dreaming.

Our first reading this morning wove together Psalm 40 with words spoken by Dr. King. The psalm offers encouragement to those who are feeling frustrated by the challenges of everyday life. The psalmist reflects in a personal way about how God has pulled him up out of the "miry pit" and helped him to find secure footing. He uses his own experiences with God's faithfulness to remind the rest of us to trust in God no matter what kind of challenges come our way. This faith expressed by the psalmist is the faith that Dr. King depended on throughout his life. It is a faith that is reliable. It can be trusted. It is solid and strong. Often, when we face challenges in our lives, we forget that faith is right here with us, ready and waiting to be of use. My dad taught me a lot about faith. Some of it in words, but much of it by example. Even though I saw him as someone who could handle anything, I also saw how he relied on his faith. This caught me off guard when I was younger. I remember being impressed, and somewhat surprised, that even though he was strong and capable, and even though so many other people turned to him for wisdom and guidance, Dad was so humble and forthright when it came to his reliance on God. He depended on God every day and he wasn't afraid to show it.

The bedrock that faith forms in our lives is one thing I wanted us to think about this morning, but I also want us to consider the communal nature of faith and of God's work among us. Taken together, we are much, much, stronger than we are when we venture out on our own. *Those of us who use woodstoves to keep warm know that when you spread the embers apart, the fire cools down, but when you draw them together, they heat each other up. An old illustration about the importance of being a part of a faith community has the pastor visiting a man who didn't see much need for the church and didn't come very often on a Sunday or for other gatherings. The pastor pulled an ember out, away from the center of the fire and the two men watched the ember's light dim until it finally went out. At that point the pastor turned to the man and said, "I don't want your light to go out. I want your faith to stay strong." The man took the poker and pushed the cold ember back into the heart of the fire and said, "I'll be there on Sunday."*

The stark reality is that we need one another in order to live full lives of faith. Sure, you can do okay out on your own for a while, but there comes a time in your life when you need others to lean on, when you need to be reminded that someone else knows what is going on in your life and that they care for you. And it goes both ways. The community needs *you* as well. When you look closely at our reading from First Corinthians, you might notice that Paul is speaking to the community as a whole. When he recounts the blessings that the people in Corinth have been given by God, it becomes clear that these are gifts given to the entire community, and not just to specific individuals for their own benefit. This is a factor in the life of faith that we often neglect or

overlook. We assume that we are not hurting anyone else by being a lone wolf, by keeping to ourselves, but the reality is that God created us to be in community, in relationship. God gives gifts to individuals under the assumption that each of us will share these gifts with the rest of the community.

What I find particularly challenging about the time period we are living in right now, is that so many people are concerned only with themselves, with their own well being. Many people dismiss the idea that we are all responsible for one another. They feel each person should take responsibility for him or herself and that those who have more in terms of wealth or privilege are somehow better than those who have less. But this kind of thinking creates all kinds of problems, as Dr. Jeff Ritterman, Vice President of the Board of Directors, San Francisco Bay Area chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility writes: *“In highly unequal countries, like the United States, health outcome and social well-being suffer. We don’t live as long as our peers in more equal countries, nor do our infants or children. We’re fatter, more of our teens get pregnant, we incarcerate more of our citizens, our children score worse on math and science tests, we trust one another less, and we kill one another more often. We even recycle less often. Greater inequality of income leads to a generalized societal dysfunction. We correctly perceive that we are not all in the same boat, and we are more likely to view the world as a Hobbesian struggle for individual survival and advantage.”*

Thomas Hobbes, who is referred to here, saw human beings as selfish creatures who are only concerned about taking care of their own needs and satisfying their own desires. His viewpoint seems to have taken hold in certain quarters of our society these days, but it is not a Christian way of seeing the world. From the Christian perspective, we are not meant to go it alone. We are not meant to look out for number one while ignoring the needs of those around us. In fact individual self-interest goes against everything that Jesus taught, and all that his life exemplified. Jesus and his disciples, as well as the early Christians, formed communities of deep fellowship. They shared whatever they had with one another. They ate their meals together, shared ideas and challenges with one another. They lifted up those who needed help and each contributed to the well being of the whole group as best they could.

As we look to become a beloved community, we need to understand that this isn’t just a group of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time – or even the same church at the same time. Becoming a beloved community means we have to be intentional about who and what we want to be, and the effect we want to have on the world around us. The beloved community is a group of people who care deeply for one another, who want the best for one another. A beloved community is one in which everyone has what he or she needs, where there is no discrimination, and where each person is seen, respected and treated as a beloved brother or sister. A beloved community is a place where we can live out our faith with one another, knowing that the love that binds us together is making a difference as it stretches out into the world.

*Loving God, we yearn to be the community you dream of. We yearn to care for one another, to ensure that no one goes hungry or without shelter. We yearn to be your people here, in the midst of the challenges that face this society in which we live. Guide us, Lord, renew your dream in us and in this community. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*