

Moving beyond King's Dream to find his Beloved Community

Contributed by Rev. Dr. R. Joaquin Willis
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It's time, I believe, to wake up from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream" of becoming the "Beloved Community." In 1974, Dr. Kenneth L. Smith and Ira G. Zepp Jr., in *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* a book they co-authored, point out the concept of 'The Beloved Community' was central to Dr. King's thinking.

Liberalism and personalism provided his theological and philosophical foundations and nonviolence was his means of attaining it.

Over time, Dr. King's initial optimism became qualified by his understanding of the 20th century's most influential theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, on Christian realism. Dr. King's vision of the "Beloved Community," as outlined by Drs. Smith and Zepp, became a vision of total relatedness, justice for everyone, alleviating economic inequity and a pilgrimage to the Promised Land.

King's concept of the "Beloved Community" can be traced throughout all his speeches and writings. In 1957, he said, the "ultimate aim" of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which he led, "is to foster and create the 'Beloved Community'" and in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*, his final book, he said, "Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation."

King understood integration is much more inclusive and positive than desegregation. Smith and Zepp said,

"Desegregation can be achieved by laws – integration requires a change in attitude, it involves personal and social relationships created by love – love cannot be legislated...All of us will have to become color blind."

After the March to Montgomery in 1966, thousands of marchers sat delayed at the airport waiting on their planes, Dr. King was impressed and said:

"As I stood with them and saw white and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizers, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shop workers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I knew I was seeing a

microcosm of the mankind of the future in this moment of luminous and genuine brotherhood.”

Dr. King also believed life is sacred. His view was of an egalitarian socialist approach to wealth and poverty. Property, to Dr. King, was “intended to serve life and no matter how much we surround property with rights and respect, it is not a person. Property is part of the earth, man walks on; it is not man.” Therefore, one of Dr. King’s goals was to bridge the gap between abject poverty and inordinate wealth.

Recent research by The Children’s Defensive Fund reveals “that a fulltime working mother on minimum wage, in any state within America, cannot afford to rent a place to live.” Dr. King’s belief was God’s intention was for everyone to have the physical and spiritual necessities of life. He couldn’t envision the “Beloved Community” apart from the alleviation of economic inequity and the achievement of full economic justice.

Dr. Smith says of King’s belief, “Although man’s moral pilgrimage may never reach a destination point on earth, man’s never-ceasing strivings may bring him ever closer to the city of righteousness.”

President Barack Obama, the first black president, speaking at the dedication of the King Monument on Oct. 16, 2011, standing in the shadow of King’s Memorial Wall, said:

“Change has never been simple or without controversy, change depends on persistence. Change requires determination.

“It took a decade before the moral guidance of Brown vs Board of Education was translated into the enforcement measures of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act – but Dr. King didn’t give up.”

In other words, when Dr. King met with hardship and disappointment and he refused to accept what he called the “isness” of today, he kept pushing towards the “oughtness” of tomorrow.

The president goes on to say, “We’ve got to keep pushing for what ought to be, the America we ought to leave to our children” -- and I say, the America which ought to wake-up from Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” and become his “Beloved Community.”

Editor’s note: The following are remarks delivered at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Service hosted by Temple Israel.

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