

***SEEKING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY***

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As a 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teacher in a richly diverse inner-ring suburb of Hartford, I have had the opportunity, for four years now, to participate in a major educational (slash) psychological study being conducted under the leadership of at least three psychology professors at Yale. What is being tested is the importance of how a student perceives a teacher's view of him (or her), the feelings this perception engenders in the student, and the impact these feelings have on that student's performance. The basic idea is this: How a student feels about himself and his place in the classroom is a significant factor in how well that student might do on a particular test or a given course of studies. The premise seems pretty obvious, except that this study is especially concerned with how these self-perceptions among students may contribute to the "achievement gap" that has set in between white and non-white students. Of particular concern is finding approaches that will help young black males consistently improve their academic performance. That's the main reason I was interested in my school's participation when the proposed study was presented to an initial gathering of teachers and administrators five years ago, along with the fact that I think we teachers need to find ways to remain sensitive to how what we say and do affect our students' learning. (And sometimes I really think it's the teachers who are being tested and studied.)

In the second year of the study, we three 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teachers were asked to come up with some kind of writing assignment that would enable us to go a little deeper. Given the nature of our course—the Ancient World---we settled on asking students to write about somebody they considered a hero. This also gave us a chance to

study what the ancients had to say about heroism, as well as contemporary thought about the apparent human need for heroes, like Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

Once we disqualified the category of "super-hero" (Spider-Man was big this year), there tended to be two figures who appeared consistently at the top of our students' lists of their five heroes. One was Mom, which may say something about the number of single-parent families in any school; the other was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The prevalence of Dr. King as real hero was across the board, racially. Maybe there was a January King Day factor, or a February Black History Month factor, but the assignment comes in March and April. There are plenty of distractions that take place in 7<sup>th</sup> graders' minds between January & February and March & April.

The importance of Martin Luther King, Jr. to our students has been so compelling that this year we asked them to study a *Junior Scholastics* article on King and consider him as a paradigm of the true hero. This also allowed us to ask our students to do note-taking, while thinking more deeply about why we look to Dr. King. I have begun to think that something significant is going on here. This is my 4<sup>th</sup> of July thought: As Abraham Lincoln's great 19<sup>th</sup> century work of holding the Union together and ending slavery made him our real national hero of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so the Rev. Dr. King's great 20<sup>th</sup> century work of ending American apartheid through non-violent civil disobedience has made him our real national hero of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Hopefully, the present Supreme Court won't declare in a 5 to 4 ruling that the King Holiday is unconstitutional!) It was this growing awareness of the significance of Martin Luther King, Jr. for young Americans that caused me to pay close attention to the discussion of the "Beloved Community" that was the

focus of Bill McKinney's Hooker Lecture this spring. It is to the hope that this ideal---the Beloved Community---offers our country and our world, that I want to turn this morning.

In his talk, Dr. McKinney quoted a recent book by the theologian, Charles Marsh, who located the idea of the "Beloved Community" in the experience of the black churches of the South as a religious revival movement. After the lecture, we began to ask about the source of the term for Dr. King. The connection between "Beloved Community" and the Civil Rights Movement is certain, but as we began to wonder about the term's origin nobody could say for sure how the "Beloved Community" ideal came to be a key term in King's writing about the ultimate goal of non-violent disobedience of unjust segregation laws. Being a good scholar, Dr. McKinney googled the term later that night and reported on its origins the next day. When you "Google" "Beloved Community," at the top of the list is The King Center in Atlanta, which gives a very helpful discussion of the term in relation to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work. The first paragraph of this article acknowledges that "The Beloved Community" is a term first coined in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the philosopher-theologian, Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation." This origin in philosophical idealism, I think, has real significance for our world today.

Though there is no doubt that the Rev. King "popularized the term(Beloved Community) and invested it with deeper meaning," his use of the term may have more to say about the "Doctor" side of Martin, than the "Reverend" side. What church folk often forget is that Martin Luther King, Jr. spent a considerable amount of time up in Boston studying the "idealist" school of philosophy, popularly known as "The Metaphysical Club," of which Josiah Royce was a major voice.

Googling “Josiah Royce” brings us to a *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s* article where we learn that, while Royce’s close friend, William James, was studying the individual nature of the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Royce, himself, was thinking about the nature of loyalty and the priority of community in human experience. Josiah Royce was a philosophical idealist who took religion, especially Christianity, seriously, but struggled to look beyond particular creeds and historical expressions of religion. “Finally,” the Stanford article tells us, “beyond the actual communities that we directly encounter in life there is the ideal ‘Beloved Community’ of all those who would be fully dedicated to the cause of loyalty, truth and reality itself.”

It is important to remember that Martin Luther King Jr.’s idealism was grounded not just in the Christian Churches of the North and South of our United States of America, but also in the philosophy and idealism that extends back through Josiah Royce to Ralph Waldo Emerson to Theodore Parker, to our nation’s founding deists like Jefferson and Franklin, and even to Jonathon Edward’s own enthusiasm for John Locke.

In today’s world of religious conflict and sectarian strife here and abroad, we need to pay attention to philosophy, maybe even more so than theology. We need to be able to broaden religious discourse beyond dogmas, doctrines and particular parochial denominational body. Philosophy, after all, has been considered theology’s handmaiden since the time of the Church Fathers. Taking seriously the work of philosophy allows us to do just that. I think Dr. King understood that his “Dream” was rooted as much in the self-evident philosophical ideal that “all people are created equal” as it was in the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Jesus. “The Beloved Community” reaches beyond our particular theological vision of the Kingdom of God, opening the door to Muslim, to

Hindu, to Jew, to Buddhist, or any other person who seeks the ideal human community beyond the limits of our historical and cultural experiences of this world.

Before eyes glaze over completely from all this rather academic talk, I want to turn to the passage from Paul's Epistle to the Galatians as an illustration of why we need to pay attention to philosophy when we think about our faith.

As I read St. Paul's appeal for good behavior among the Christians of Galatia in Asia Minor, I recognize the classical listing of moral vices and virtues my New Testament Professor Malherbe used to talk about at Yale Divinity School. I don't think I need to explain which list is the virtuous one, and, don't worry, I won't get graphic about the vices. But what bothers me most is the false dichotomy between Spirit and Flesh. It's a misrepresentation of reality that, I think, was rooted in the neo-Platonism that the well-schooled Saul of Tarsus (aka Paul) must have absorbed from the teachings of a major Jewish philosopher of his day, Philo of Alexandria. I think we all would agree that the relationship between mind and body, spirit and flesh, is, in reality, much more complex than the simple split St. Paul sets out.

Now if we could NOT think philosophically about St. Paul's dualism, we would have to conform how we think about human nature to his black/white, good/bad, spirit/body dualistic neo-Platonic world view. But is this what the Good News of Christ is all about? As St. Paul might rhetorically reply, "By no means!" The key to this passage from Galatians is what Jesus had taught as the summary of all the law and commandments, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In the commandment "to love one another as we love ourselves," there is no neo-Platonic split between flesh and spirit, but an appeal to the Christian ideal of *agape*, the

form of love that joins heart and mind, emotions and thoughts. In his commentary on the “fruits of the Spirit” listed by St. Paul, William Barclay describes this love as “a feeling of the mind as much as it is of the heart; it concerns the will just as much as it does the emotions.” There is no neo-Platonic split here, but a wholistic view of “living in the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit,” seeking what Dr. Josiah Royce and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would both call “The Beloved Community.” Spirit and flesh, not in opposition, but working in concert.

For the past few weeks, the lectionary readings from the Hebrew scriptures have been telling the story of the two great heroic prophets, Elijah and Elisha. Today’s reading was all about the succession of the office from the mentor Elijah to the protege Elisha, passing on the mantle, we might say. But one detail of today’s reading jumped out at me:

“Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.”

This happens twice in the story! The power of mantle may matter more than who gets the mantle. It is the rolled-up mantle of prophecy that divides the water and allows the two to progress.

As I read the story, I couldn’t help thinking of Moses and his use of Aaron’s rod to split the waters so that the Israelites could pass from the thrall of slavery to the real promise of freedom. I wonder if in focusing so much on “heroes” of the faith, like Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, Paul, the Abrahams, and the Martins, we miss, or dodge, or avoid the real reality, which surely is the power of God represented by the mantle rolled

up. We keep looking for, and depending upon, the great souls, the mahatmas, to do the work of reconciliation for us, when all the while we would/should/could be seeking and building the “Beloved Community.”

As we approach our Holy Communion, let us seek the Beloved Community that is made known to our human kind through the presence of Christ. May we open ourselves to that power of love, that is beyond any of our human knowing.

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This week I attended an educators’ conference, sponsored by The East Rock Foundation in New Haven, dedicated to teaching about Korea. The conference was hosted by Yale Divinity School. During the breaks I spent time wandering through the buildings that were familiar on the outside, but reconfigured on the inside. On one of the bulletin boards, I found a quote from William Sloan Coffin’s book, *Credo*, which, I think, points toward the “Beloved Community” we seek.

“Jesus was more,” Coffin wrote, “not less, than a prophet; more, not less, political than others. Only his were the politics of eternity. And the politics of eternity insist not only on nonviolence---an affront to almost every revolutionary; they insist on ‘one world’—an affront to every nationalist. We shall begin to understand the politics of eternity when we recognize that territorial discriminations is as evil as racial discrimination.”

May we ever seek “The Beloved Community” that exists above and beyond all our borders and boundaries.

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