



# THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A LOVE-FILLED LIFE

A LEARNING SERIES  
BY REV. JASMINE ROSE SMOTHERS



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Message from the Author**  
03

**Lesson Plan for Small Group Leaders**  
05

**Series Introduction**  
08

**Small Group Lesson Week One**  
The Cornerstone  
10

**Small Group Lesson Week Two**  
The Foundation  
19

**Small Group Lesson Week Three**  
The Keystone  
31

**Small Group Lesson Week Four**  
The Capstone  
41

**Small Group Lesson Week Five**  
The Mortar  
51

**Small Group Lesson Week Six**  
The Roof  
62

**Acknowledgements**  
73



## MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

Yoichi Okamoto - Lyndon Baines Johnson  
Library and Museum.  
Image Serial Number: W28-12.

# THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A LOVE-FILLED LIFE

We are embarking upon a mission to discover, develop, design and build the Beloved Community. Building the Beloved Community requires a love-filled life. Over the next six weeks, we will learn together what the Beloved Community is, what God intends for the community, what we need to build this community, what we may need to let go of or even sacrifice and how we can work together to achieve the vision of the Beloved Community.

This year, 2024, marks the 60th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This landmark legislation made the prohibition of discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin (and later, sex) the law of the land. It built on the work of assassinated President John F. Kennedy and honored his legacy of bringing equality to voting rights, access to public places, public education, and equity in labor laws. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson worked side-by-side with Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to create the Beloved Community through legislation.

As a pastor, facilitator, preacher, consultant, community theologian and small group leader, small groups, Sunday School and study groups exist for transformation. We can read the Bible for knowledge in isolation. Yet, when we choose to learn in community, we can be transformed together and we can be transformed and, therefore, go forth as transformation agents in the world. This is discipleship. And discipleship is the call of God on our lives.

There is no point in engaging in this study if we don't want to grow or if we are resistant to God's movement in our lives. The Beloved Community comes into focus when, together, we open ourselves to the radical love that Jesus Christ models for us.

We'll look to the early church in the Acts 2 scriptures for most of our study. Acts will be partnered with other scriptures to help us understand how we design a community that reflects the early church model found in the Book of Acts.

So many things are changing in our world and our communities. In such seasons of change, it is imperative that we spiritually tear down what is not helpful in our lives and build up what is helpful from God. In doing so, God is preparing us to create the Beloved Community for those coming to seek the abundant life that Christ promises! We must be spiritually prepared to grow and to help others grow!

Each week is organized with a Beloved Community principle, block we need to build, a scripture to carry with us and a theme that we will explore. Each week includes a memory verse to learn, discussion questions and an action for the week. Sessions are designed to create and foster a community atmosphere through which all are encouraged and invited to add to the discussion. The more we grow together, the more walls that come down, the more honest discussion we have – the more God can transform our hearts, minds and souls.

It's time to jump in! Remember, we are pursuing transformation not just information. Look for God at work in your community and yourselves in the coming days. I'm praying for open minds and open hearts as we study together.



Expect God to reveal something new to us!  
After all, it is a new season!

Grace and Peace,  
**Pastor Jasmine**



# LESSON PLAN FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

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Your role in this study is to facilitate conversation. Please model an atmosphere that is safe, welcoming, invitational and encourages participants to contribute to the discussion. You can do this by encouraging RESPECT and confidentiality.

## ERIC LAW'S RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES:

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R – Take **Responsibility** for what you say and feel without blaming others.  
E – Use **Empathetic** listening.  
S – Be **Sensitive** to differences in communication/cultural styles.  
P – **Ponder** what you hear and feel before you speak.  
E – **Examine** your own assumptions and perceptions.  
C – Keep **Confidentiality**.  
T – **Tolerate** ambiguity because we are not here to debate.  
There are no “winners” or “losers.”

For this study, confidentiality means that outside of the group, we can discuss what we learned and what stuck with us. We will not repeat or quote anyone without their explicit permission. Remind the group about confidentiality each week.

Each small-group lesson is divided into five sections, described below. Within each section, read the written text with the group and then lead them through the discussion questions.

As you study and prepare, begin and end your own planning session with prayer just as you will begin and end each small group lesson with prayer.

Some weeks, some content may lead to painful memories or cause emotional reactions. If you are a lay person leading this study, consider having a clergy person or counselor who can be made available for follow-up with individuals who need spiritual care. If you are a

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<sup>1</sup> “Eric Law’s Respectful Communication Guidelines,” Discipleship Ministries, United Methodist Church, accessed [December 2023], <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/eric-laws-respectful-communication-guidelines>.



clergy person leading this study, be mindful of this need as well. Note when someone is overwhelmed by the content and offers ways to follow-up with them outside of the group time.

Be mindful of accessibility. Consider projecting the questions on a screen. Provide written copies of the content so that participants can read along. When reading aloud, allow time for comprehension and thought.

The content of each lesson is designed to cover 75 minutes. The length of some sections varies from week to week, but the total time is always 75 minutes. You may find that there is more content than you can cover in that time. As you prepare, make decisions about the most important learnings in each section for your group.

Each small-group session is divided into five sections to help meet our learning goals:

1. Define Beloved Community. Demonstrate the concept's biblical, spiritual and theological foundations and its popularization during the American Civil Rights Movement by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
2. Show how disciples can personify agape love and how communities, through the agape love of God and empowerment through the Holy Spirit, can become places of redemption and reconciliation where all people can share in the abundance of wealth in the world.

**OPENING AND RECAP:** Each week, begin with prayer. The first week, summarize the focus for the lesson by reading aloud the building block, guiding principle and memory verse. After the first week, this section begins with a recap of the previous week's building block, guiding principle and memory verse as well as a brief discussion of observations participants made as they took the actions assigned at the end of the previous week. After the recap, each week the opening section follows the pattern to summarize the focus for the lesson by reading aloud the building block, guiding principle and memory verse.

**DISCOVER:** This section lays the initial foundation for learning each week. Read the section aloud or have members of the group read the section aloud. Discussion: If the group is shy about answering the questions, make the questions about personal experience and then move them into more theological and biblical reflections. For example, you could ask them to talk about a time they experienced the Beloved Community in action in their life or to share why they feel like they have not experienced the Beloved Community in action. Then ask, where they have seen the Beloved Community in the Bible or heard about it in worship or small groups?

**DEVELOP:** This section builds on what is learned in the Discover section and invites people to see themselves implementing what we learn each week. Read the section aloud and ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate in the discussions. Many scriptures are offered to explore the concepts. Feel free to select a few for the group.

**DESIGN:** This section invites participants to see the Beloved Community as a reality in their own lives. Invite people to begin to see the Beloved Community as a real possibility that can be realized through the church.

**BUILD:** This is the action section. Assign the action steps for participants to reflect on and practice throughout the week.

**CLOSING:** Be sure to emphasize the action for the week at the end of the lesson and remind the participants of the block, theme, principle and memory at the beginning and end of the session. For example, the first week:

- **BLOCK:** Cornerstone
- **THEME:** The Image of God
- **PRINCIPLE:** Agape Love. Recognize and honor the image of God in every person.
- **REMEMBER:** The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118:22-24 (NRSVUE)

Additional resources are listed at the end of each lesson.

## **SERIES INTRODUCTION**

Rent, groceries, utilities and other costs of living are high. War and natural disasters are wreaking havoc all over the world. Pain and fear dominate life. Does God care anymore? Does God care about me? About us? Where is this abundant life that Jesus promises? But what if we are asking the wrong questions? Is there a more excellent way?

Do you remember the old preschool building blocks? You know the ones! They were wood, about an inch or two all the way around. They had a letter on one side, a number with another color on another side, and maybe an animal or something else on another side. We used those blocks to build, count, learn our letters, learn to share and learn the fundamentals of life.

Let's explore together what it takes to build the life Jesus promises, the Beloved Community. Guided by scripture, we will explore the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the Beloved Community. We will lean into the "building blocks" of a love-filled life as we discover, develop, design, and build the Beloved Community together for such a time as this. Do not miss this life-changing series as we dive deeper into the building blocks and practical ways to #BeLove.

## **SERIES OUTLINE**

Week 1: The Cornerstone – The Image of God

Principle: Agape Love. Recognize and honor the image of God in every person.

Week 2: The Foundation – Bound Together

Principle: Personal Authenticity and Respect. Affirm differences rather than erase them.

Week 3: The Keystone – Shared Truth

Principle: Caring for Everyone

Week 4: The Capstone – The Inclusivity of Reconciliation

Principle: Radical Inclusivity and Hospitality

Week 5: The Mortar – The Freedom of Justice

Principle: Eliminating Poverty, Hunger, and Hate while sharing resources and the wealth of the earth equitably

Week 6: The Roof – A Vision of the Beloved Community

Principle: Personal Responsibility



## **SERIES PROMO**

Rent, groceries, utilities and other costs of living are high. War and natural disasters are wreaking havoc all over the world. Pain and fear dominate life. Does God care anymore? Does God care about me? About us? Where is this abundant life that Jesus promises? But what if we are asking the wrong questions? Is there a more excellent way?

Over six weeks, we will explore what it takes to build the life Jesus promises, the Beloved Community. Guided by scripture, we will explore the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the Beloved Community. And, leaning into the "building blocks" of a love-filled life, we will discover, develop, design and build the Beloved Community together for such a time as this. Do not miss this life-changing series as we dive deeper into the ways to #BeLove.



# WEEK 1

# SMALL GROUP SESSION

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## OPENING (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)

(Begin with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to give everyone an open heart and a learning spirit. Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.)

This week's lesson is:

The Cornerstone: The Image of God.

Our guiding principle is:

*Agape Love: Recognize and honor the image of God in every person.*

Here are some grounding scriptures for our study today and throughout the week:

Genesis 1:26-27, 1 Peter 2:2-10, Acts 17:24-28.

Our memory verse for this lesson is:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

*Psalm 118:22-24 (NRSVUE)*

Let's read the scripture together.

(All read aloud.)

Let everyone say, "Amen!"



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unless I am a member of a community.” Royce defines communities of grace, genuineness, loyalty, and natural communities that form merely because of proximity to the people inside the community. Yet, Royce believed that the ideal community was the “Beloved Community.” The Beloved Community “would be fully dedicated to the cause of loyalty, truth, and reality itself.”<sup>2</sup>

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., adapted Royce’s “Beloved Community” to help the world see what a God-led, faithful, love-filled life and community could look like beyond the non-violent principles of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. The vision of the Beloved Community today is a vision of *agape* love. *Agape*<sup>3</sup> is a Greek word (*think, New Testament*) that refers to the generous, action-oriented love of Jesus Christ. It is a love that you can be seen in how we treat God and God’s creation. You can see *agape* love in our behavior in the world. It is unconditional, sacrificial love. It is the love that Jesus is talking about when he commands the people to love God and love their neighbor. *Agape* love is not a feeling that happens to you. *Agape* love is a movement that happens through you. *Agape* love is a hands-on, do-something love that transforms people and communities.

## DISCOVER (SUGGESTED)

### TIME: 20 MINUTES

Together, let’s discover some of the history and application of the concept of Beloved Community. (*Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.*)

In the early 1900s, a philosopher-theologian, Josiah Royce, conducted extensive research about the “theory of community.” Royce believed that the people of God were created to live in community. Royce believed theories of human individualism were extreme, unhelpful and antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. “My life means nothing,” Royce wrote in 1913, “either theoretically or practically,

<sup>2</sup> “Parker, Kelly A. and Scott Pratt, “Josiah Royce”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/royce/>>

<sup>3</sup> Video suggestion: The Bible Project: Agape - Love <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slyevQ1LW7A> (accessed January 2024.)

According to The King Center, Dr. King's Beloved Community is "a realistic, achievable goal... a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict." <sup>4</sup>

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DISCOVER WEEK 1)**

Let's take some time to consider these questions.

What is the Beloved Community?

Where have you seen the Beloved Community in action?

Where does the Beloved Community seem to be missing?

Spend some time dreaming. What could the Beloved Community of today look like? What does it feel like, smell like, sound like, taste like?

*(Use a whiteboard to capture these shared dreams. Screenshot or photograph the list to return to in future lessons.)*

### **DEVELOP (SUGGESTED TIME: 20 MINUTES)**

Together, let's develop how we can apply what we have learned about Beloved Community and understand how to implement these scriptural principles in our lives.  
*(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

In the Beginning... God invites humanity into a plan of agape love. God creates from chaos, darkness and nothingness. God invites humans to be stewards of all that God has created. God creates humanity in the imago Dei, the image of God.

Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So, God created humans in (God's) image, in the image of God, (God) created them; male and female (God) created them. Genesis 1:26-27 (NRSVUE)

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<sup>4</sup> <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>. Accessed January 2024

If we believe in the scripture and that all people are made in the image of God for agape love, then we must live with a human understanding of mutuality and equity. Mutuality means that all of God's people are equal in the sight of God. Everyone has the same status and responsibility in God's economy. It is impossible to live in God's plan of agape love through God's image in humanity if we do not recognize mutuality in people or demand equity in our communities. This biblical, spiritual, and theological truth is confirmed in 1 John:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love... Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. 1 John 4:7-21 (NRSVUE)

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DEVELOP WEEK 1)**

- What do we learn about God in Genesis 1:26-27?

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- Who is "us"?

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- What is the responsibility of humanity?

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- Where do you see equity and mutuality in this scripture?

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- What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

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- Who is made in the image of God?

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- Explore the following scriptures. (Have members of the group read some or all aloud.)  
Genesis 5:1-2, Deuteronomy 6:4-7, Psalm 100:3-5, Psalm 139:13-14, Matthew 22:36-40, Acts 17:24-28, Colossians 1:15-23c, Colossians 3:8-14, 1 John 4:7-21

#### **DESIGN (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)**

Together, let's consider how to create the Beloved Community as a reality in our own lives and how the Beloved Community is a real possibility within the church.

*(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

Scripture tells us all people are made in the *imago Dei*. All humanity has the potential to live into God's abundant life through *agape* love. All humanity has the opportunity to thrive through recognizing and honoring the image of God in all people.

The opposite is also true. If we fail to love God and God's creation through our activity in the world, we miss out on the opportunity for true abundant life on this side of God's kingdom. Why are gun violence, hunger and disease so prevalent today? We disobey God's commandment of *agape* love and fall short of the Beloved Community. Failing to love God and God's people has consequences.

Rev. Jasmine Rose Smothers, author of this series, writes: "I love building. I love Legos, blocks, Post-it® notes, notecards – any material I can build with. Do you remember the old preschool building blocks? You know the ones! They were wood, about an inch or two all the way around. They had a letter on one side, a number with another color on another side, and maybe an animal or something else on another side. The letter and the number were raised so that you could feel and see them. We used those blocks to build, count, learn our letters, learn to share, and learn the fundamentals of life!"

Building can teach us a lot today. In Psalm 118:22-24, we are introduced to Jesus as a building block. Yes, the image of God made flesh - a building block!"

The Psalmist writes:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (NRSVUE)



Have you ever tried to build anything with a wobbling cornerstone – the stone that anchors every other piece of the structure? It didn't work in preschool, and it won't work now. 1 Peter 2 admonishes us, “like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

All people are made by God and in the image of God. If we are indeed a people of God, we will honor God by following the cornerstone, Jesus. Jesus commanded agape love of all of God's people. You cannot love God if you do not love God's people.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DESIGN WEEK 1)

Read 1 Peter 2:6-10 aloud and discuss its meaning together.

<sup>6</sup>“For it stands in scripture: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ <sup>7</sup>To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’ <sup>8</sup>and ‘A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. <sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

What does it mean that we are all God's own people? How do you respond to this call?

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**BUILD: (SUGGESTED TIME: 15 MINUTES)**

Together, let's prepare to build the Beloved Community. This week, we focus on the first stone – the Cornerstone, Jesus the Christ, the living *imago Dei*. We will share actions to take this week (and actions to avoid) as we begin to build Beloved Community. (*Read aloud the actions to take – and some to avoid – in the coming week.*)

Jesus challenges us to offer agape love to all people.

Consider: Who do you have a hard time loving? Why do you think you have a hard time loving them? What can you do, through your actions, to love them tangibly this week?

Tearing down: Gossip, assumption and insistence on “tradition” for tradition’s sake can break down the Beloved Community. Author Matthew Kelly writes in his book, *Life is Messy*, that “Gossip is one of the most rampant and pervasive evils at work in our culture today. Gossip can never be undone. It alters the way people see another person forever. It robs the victim of dignity and opportunity.”

How can you refrain from or walk away from gossip this week?

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Building up: Invitation, authenticity, and the greatest commandments build up the Beloved Community. An authentic conversation with someone you struggle with can vastly change the relationship. It can lead to reconciliation. Are you building up or tearing down with your words, actions, facial expressions, generosity, lack of generosity, etc.? Observe yourself this week. Make a list at the end of each day of your actions to build and actions that tore down. Next time, we will share how the week went.

Do you remember the old hymn of the church, “Love Lifted Me,” penned by James Roe in 1912?

*I was sinking deep in sin,  
Far from the peaceful shore,  
Very deeply stained within,  
Sinking to rise no more;  
But the Master of the sea  
Heard my despairing cry,  
From the waters lifted me-  
Now safe am I.*

*Refrain:*

*Love lifted me,  
Love lifted me,  
When nothing else could help,  
Love lifted me...*

Every time we struggle to see the image of God in a person or a group of people, remember this song. Love lifted you. You can lift them with your love.

### **CLOSING (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Let's review and close with prayer.

**BLOCK:** Cornerstone

**THEME:** The Image of God

**PRINCIPLE:** Agape Love. Recognize and honor the image of God in every person.

#### **REMEMBER**

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118:22-24 (NRSVUE)

#### **ACTION FOR THE WEEK**

Am I building up or tearing down with my words, actions, facial expressions, generosity, lack of generosity, etc.?

Make a list at the end of each day of how you are building the community up and tearing the community down. Be honest and vulnerable. Next week, share how the week went.

Agape love is the Beloved Community in action. The Cornerstone helps us recognize and honor the image of God in every person.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The King Center. "The Beloved Community." The King Center, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

General Commission on Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church (GCORR). "The 25 Traits of the Beloved Community." GCORR, <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

GCORR. "Equity vs. Equality: Understanding the Differences." GCORR, <https://www.r2hub.org/library/equity-vs-equality>.

The Bible Project. "Agape Love." YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slyevQ1LW7A>.

Hear the Hymn. "Love Lifted Me." Hymnary.org, <https://my.hymnary.org/song/101/lovelifted-me>.

Royce, Josiah. Parker, Kelly A. and Scott Pratt. "Josiah Royce." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2022 Edition, edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/royce/>.



# WEEK 2

# SMALL GROUP SESSION

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## OPENING (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)

(Begin with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to give everyone an open heart and a learning spirit. Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.)

Let's begin with a brief review of what we studied last time.

- We considered the Cornerstone, the Image of God.
- We considered agape love and our command to recognize and honor the image of God in every person.

Our memory verse was:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

*Psalm 118:22-24 (NRSVUE)*

Let's share what we learned during the week as we took the action of noting when we were building up the community and when we were tearing it down. Be honest and vulnerable. Remember all we share together is confidential.

This week's lesson is:

The Foundation: Bound Together.

Our guiding principle is:

Personal Authenticity and Respect. Affirm differences rather than erase them.

Here are some grounding scriptures for our study today and throughout the week:

Acts 2:1-12, Luke 6:20-38.

Our memory verse for this lesson is:

Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you. *Luke 6:31 (CEB)*

Let's read the scripture together.

(All read aloud.)

Let everyone say, "Amen!"

### **DISCOVER (SUGGESTED TIME: 25 MINUTES)**

Together, let's discover some of the history and application of the concept of Beloved Community. (Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)

The core value, or guiding principle, of the Beloved Community is *agape* love. *Agape* love is the action-oriented, unconditional, sacrificial and transformational love that Jesus Christ teaches the followers of God. *Agape* love is purposeful. It leads to wholeness, manifested as abundant life for all of God's humanity.



Once you have a cornerstone – the stone that every other stone depends upon to hold it up – you can begin to build a solid foundation. Foundations make or break building projects. The foundation of a building determines whether it will stand up – by itself – against the weather and over time. The foundation only works if all the blocks are bound together to form a strong base for what is to come.

Weak foundations have gaps that allow elements to enter and damage the base, causing it to weaken and deteriorate. On the other hand, strong foundations are built to prevent any harmful elements from affecting the integrity of the base. Weak foundations are not durable and cannot withstand challenging conditions. On the other hand, solid, strong foundations can endure for a long time, even forever.

In a strong, healthy, long-lasting, challenge-resisting foundation, every block has a function, and no one block tries to assume the role of the other block. We no longer have a strong foundation if one block tries to replace another. If one block decides that it is more important than another, we no longer have a strong foundation. If one block is missing, we no longer have a strong foundation. Every block must perform its role in the foundation with the material that it is made of. In this way, every block combines with others to create a strong foundation.

Last week, we discussed the *imago Dei* - the image of God. If we believe that all of humanity is made in the image of God, then we must believe that God values diversity. While we are all created in the *imago Dei*, we are not all the same. God did not create humanity on a copy machine. God formed humanity and knit together a diverse humanity. God must love diversity!

Diversity can be defined as the state of being composed of different elements or qualities. In the context of social and cultural settings, diversity refers to the presence of various identities and experiences, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion and socio-economic status. Embracing diversity means recognizing and valuing the differences that exist among individuals and communities and working towards creating inclusive environments where everyone feels respected and empowered.

In a moment, we will read Acts 2:1-12. This is the story of Pentecost, also known as the Birthday of the Church, which is usually read in worship on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost means 50th Pentecost is 50 days after Easter Day. Yet, the people didn't just happen to be gathered on that first Pentecost. They were gathered for the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Weeks. It had been an agricultural celebration of praise to God for the harvest. People brought their "first fruits" - the first and best of their crop for the season - to the Temple to be given and dedicated to God. Now that the Messiah has come - Jesus resurrected from the dead on Easter Day - even though they continue to practice the tradition of gathering on the Feast of Weeks, some question whether they should continue to celebrate the traditional Jewish feast days. They gathered for the Feast of Weeks out of tradition. God used the gathering for the restoration of relational authenticity and a new invitation to faithful living.

Read Acts 2:1-12 together.

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'"

- What elements of the Beloved Community do you see in Acts 2:1-12?

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- Acts 2:3-4: What does this scripture teach us about diversity and authenticity?

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- Acts 2:5-11: How does this scripture help us understand the importance of authentic identity?

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Why is it important that language is celebrated in this text?

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- How did God use the traditional gathering of the Feast of Weeks to create a new way for people to communicate and share the love of God? In other words, how did God use the traditional gathering of the Feast of Weeks “for the restoration of relational authenticity and a new invitation to faithful living,” which became Pentecost?

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### **DEVELOP (SUGGESTED TIME: 20 MINUTES)**

Together, let's develop how we can apply what we have learned about Beloved Community and understand how to implement these scriptural principles in our lives.  
*(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

To be authentic means to be exactly who you are. To be real, genuine, what you claim to be. Historically, the church – and therefore, people associated with the church – tend to have an authenticity problem. In their 2015 book, *Not Safe for Church*, Dr. F. Douglas Powe and Rev. Jasmine Rose Summers write:

**“Congregations must be authentic in what they say and do. You must. It is not a choice. It is not an ideal to strive for. It is an action that you make up your mind to live into. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Walk equals talk. Word matches deed. If you say that you love, you have to love everyone – yes everyone – yes, even them! This is hard work. This is heart work.”**

People who say they follow Jesus must be authentic as well. Authenticity is a way of life. Our actions must match our words. If you say you love people, but your actions show that you only love people like you, you have an authenticity problem. In the Beloved Community, personal and communal authenticity is required. You must love all of God's people with word and action.

Rev. Smothers has shared: “When I was growing up and someone did something unkind to another family member, my aunt would say, ‘If you love me like you say you do, why you do me like you do?’“ It was an attention-getting question that was an indictment of behavior outside of the bounds of love that we professed. Love is an action word. It requires a specific behavior. It has a responsibility embedded in it. However, love is not uniform. Love does not require that we are all the same. This is why thriving multi-ethnic churches are so rare. In most multi-ethnic and multi-cultural models of the church today,

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<sup>5</sup> Powe, F. Douglas; Smothers, Jasmine. *Not Safe for Church: Ten Commandments for Reaching New Generations*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

we aim for a melting pot result. We want everyone to fold into the status quo that the church defines. We celebrate uniformity, not uniqueness. However, most multi-ethnic churches that thrive strive to keep a distinct flavor for everyone. They celebrate cultural holidays and festivals. The worship experience includes different types of traditions, music and liturgy that speak to the diversity of the gathered congregation. You can “taste and see” the individual ingredients. They have not all been blended as indistinct flavors.

Authenticity brings out what makes us uniquely created by God. If we ignore what is unique, we ignore the unique gifts God gives each of us to build the Beloved Community. We need every gift. Every gift! It requires an authenticity that allows others to trust that people are who they say they are.

Authenticity in its faithful form is difficult because we frequently think we love someone. However, if we engage in an authentic conversation with them, they might identify behaviors that make them feel unloved. For instance, do any of these words catch your attention?

Microaggressions. Code-switching. Implicit Bias. Gaslighting. Self-editing.

These are harmful daily behaviors that people who say they love all people engage in regularly. They can also be protective, preventative actions to offset anticipated harmful behaviors. Harvard Business Review (HBR)<sup>6</sup> often writes about the separation of word, policy and deed when it comes to these harmful behaviors in the workplace. HBR tries to equip leaders to identify and change these harmful behaviors. *Does the church? Is the church building up or tearing down people?*

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DEVELOP WEEK 2)**

What do these words mean? Can you think of examples for each category?

#### **Micro-aggressions**

“Verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group. For Black [and brown] people, they are ubiquitous across daily work and life.”<sup>7</sup> (Also known as subtle acts of exclusion; abuse)

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### **Code-switching**

“Adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities”<sup>8</sup> (Also experienced as “courtesy code-switching on behalf of another team member to ‘help’ them fit in or be understood by another team member,”<sup>9</sup> unprompted rephrasing on behalf of another

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### **Implicit Bias**

The unconscious thinking that evaluates one group and its members relative to another group even when that thinking does not align with our stated beliefs, values, or commitments. The automatic and unintentional bias that we have affects our judgments, decisions and behaviors toward the group and its members. The impact of any bias is felt by the group or its members whether or not it is intentional.<sup>10</sup>

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### **Gaslighting**

Doubting, denying, or questioning the experience of a team member such that they question their own reality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Harvard Business Review (HBR): [www.hbr.org](http://www.hbr.org)

<sup>7</sup> HBR: <https://hbr.org/2020/07/when-and-how-to-respond-to-microaggressions>

<sup>8</sup> HBR: <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-costs-of-codeswitching>

<sup>9</sup> HBR: <https://hbr.org/2023/05/make-inclusive-behaviors-habitual-on-your-team>

<sup>10</sup> GCORR: <https://www.r2hub.org/library/what-is-implicit-bias>

<sup>11</sup> HBR: <https://hbr.org/2023/05/make-inclusive-behaviors-habitual-on-your-team>

### **Self-editing**

Monitoring every word, behavior and wardrobe choice so as not to be perceived as threatening or “too” something (i.e., Black, Latina, loud, aggressive, etc.) to colleagues, friends, neighbors, etc.

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Most God-loving people would say that they do not engage in these behaviors. However, an authentic self-assessment might reveal otherwise. Even at the first Pentecost, the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing and celebrating the diversity of ethnicity and languages received a rebuke – they must be drunk! (Both gaslighting and a micro-aggression!)

Did you know that it is profoundly disrespectful and considered a micro-aggression to erase someone’s identity? We often do this thinking that we’re helping people feel safe. We say things like, “When I see you, I don’t see color.” Identity contributes to our authenticity. We strip people of dignity when we fail to celebrate their identity. We also refuse an authentic relationship with our neighbors when we refuse to interact with them authentically.

Conversely, affirmation of one’s identity leads to a deepening authentic relationship. Building a strong foundation in the Beloved Community means we resist the urge to strip people of dignity by stripping them of their identity. If you do not see the totality of me, it’s hard to have an authentic relationship with you. It is better to be authentic than try to be “easy” in a relationship with God’s people.

In authentic and respectful relationships, identity can no longer be the elephant in the room. Instead, recognition and respectful celebration of identity leads to authenticity. Respectful and difficult conversations lead to authenticity. Authenticity leads to decreased micro-aggressions, code-switching, implicit bias, gaslighting and the need for self-editing. Authenticity leads to the Beloved Community because everyone can be loved as their whole selves – the way God created them.

### **DESIGN (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)**

Together, let’s consider how to create the Beloved Community as a reality in our own lives and how the Beloved Community is a real possibility within the church.

*(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

As we consider each person's role and responsibility as a unique part of the foundation, let's read 1 Peter 2:6-10 aloud.

<sup>6</sup>"For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' <sup>7</sup>To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,' <sup>8</sup>and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. <sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Now, let's read Luke 6:20-38.

"Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. <sup>21</sup>Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. <sup>22</sup>Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. <sup>24</sup>But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. <sup>25</sup>Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. <sup>26</sup>Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

<sup>27</sup> "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup>Do to others as you would have them do to you. <sup>32</sup>"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

<sup>37</sup> Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup>give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DESIGN WEEK 2)**

Luke 6:20-38 leaves off where Pentecost begins. It is the foundation that makes Pentecost possible. Pentecost begins with a scheduled, traditional gathering of people who have gathered to “give” for the Feast of Weeks (first fruits). Luke 6:38 (NRSVUE) reads: “give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” They gave the first fruits, and God gave them the Holy Spirit. If we prioritize authenticity, what might God give to us?

Consider Luke 6:31-38: What does this scripture teach us about authenticity and respect for all humans?

From 1 Peter, what does it mean that we are all God’s own people? How do you respond to this call?

Pentecost points to authenticity, respect and diversity as fruit and work of the Spirit. It affirms the differences humans were created with and resists the erasure of differences for the sake of “going along to get along.”

Personal authenticity and respect are the vital foundation for the Beloved Community. The foundation only works if all the blocks are bound together through the trust that authenticity and respect build.

**Dream Deeper.** Add to or edit the vision of the Beloved Community that you designed last week. What could the Beloved Community of today look like? How do we build a strong foundation?

### **BUILD: (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Together, let's continue to build the Beloved Community. This week, we focus on the foundation and the principle of personal authority and respect. We will share actions to take this week (and actions to avoid) as we begin to build Beloved Community. (*Read aloud the actions to take – and some to avoid – in the coming week.*)

Spend some time becoming more familiar with micro-aggressions, code-switching, implicit bias, gaslighting, and self-editing. An easy way to do this is by researching the concepts on the United Methodist Church's Religion and Race website ([gcorr.org](http://gcorr.org)) or Harvard Business Review ([hbr.org](http://hbr.org)). While in prayer, ask God to reveal where you are experiencing and engaging in these behaviors.

Pray for God to reveal ways to be more authentic in your interactions with people who are different than you are. Wait for an answer.

### **CLOSING (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Let's review and close with prayer.

**BLOCK:** Foundation

**THEME:** Bound Together

**PRINCIPLE:** Personal Authenticity and Respect. Affirm differences rather than erase them.

### **REMEMBER**

"Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you." *Luke 6:31 (CEB)*

### **ACTION FOR THE WEEK**

Become more familiar with micro-aggressions, code-switching, implicit bias, gaslighting and self-editing.

Pray for God to reveal where you are experiencing or engaging in these actions. Pray for ways to be more authentic in interactions with people who are different from you.

Agape love is the Beloved Community in action. The **Cornerstone** helps us recognize and honor the image of God in every person. The **Foundation** calls us all to personal authenticity and respect for all others. We affirm our differences and do not erase differences as we all form the foundation for Beloved Community.

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The King Center - What is the Beloved Community: <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

General Commission of Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church (GCORR):  
[GCORR.org](http://GCORR.org)

GCORR - The 25 traits of the Beloved Community: <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

Harvard Business Review: [HBR.org](http://HBR.org)

Powe, F. Douglas; Smothers, Jasmine. Not Safe for Church: Ten Commandments for Reaching New Generations. Abingdon Press.

The Bible Project Podcasts on Feasts and Festivals: <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/sacred-time-feast-flight/> or <https://bibleproject.com/podcast/seven-festivals>



# WEEK 3

# SMALL GROUP SESSION

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## OPENING (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)

(Begin with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to give everyone an open heart and a learning spirit. Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.)

Let's begin with a brief review of what we studied last time.

- We considered The Foundation: Bound Together.
- We considered the guiding principle of Personal Authenticity and Respect. And our responsibility is to affirm differences rather than erase them.

| Our memory verse was:

Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you. *Luke 6:31 (CEB)*

Let's share what we learned about micro-aggressions, code-switching, implicit bias, gaslighting and self-editing this week. In your prayer time, what did God reveal about where you are experiencing or engaging in these behaviors? Be honest and vulnerable. Remember all we share together is confidential.

This week's lesson is:

The Keystone: Shared Truth.

Our guiding principle is:

Caring for Everyone

Here are some grounding scriptures for our study today and throughout the week:

Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:25-28 (Optional: add verses 29-37).

Our memory verse for this lesson is:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. *Matthew 22:37b-39 (NRSVUE)*

Let's read the scripture together.

(All read aloud.)

Let everyone say, "Amen!"

### **DISCOVER (SUGGESTED TIME: 25 MINUTES)**

Together, let's discover some of the history and application of the concept of Beloved Community. (*Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.*)

The Beloved Community's core value, or guiding principle, is *agape* love. Every other principle teaches us HOW to practice and live out *agape* love. This week we focus on the principle of "caring for everyone." In the Beloved Community, caring for everyone means creating stability so all may experience the abundant life that Jesus Christ promises.

In ancient architecture and still today, doorways are often built in arched structures. The wedge-shaped stone or brick at the top of the arch is called the keystone. The keystone provides stability. Without the keystone, everything else would fall around it. The keystone provides a bridge between structures. It provides an opening through which to travel. It provides a way to enter and exit. The keystone is the final piece placed during construction and "locks" all the stones into position, allowing the arch to bear weight. This central position and function make it crucial to the stability and integrity of the arch.



The cornerstone is the stone that anchors every other stone and is the starting point of the structure. The cornerstone provides the template, or the "image," for other stones used in the building. The foundation, the lowest part of the building that is often not seen, distributes and holds the weight of the built structure – binding it together to hold up what is placed on top. The keystone locks all the pieces together to ensure the structural integrity of an arch, window or doorway.

This week, we use the keystone as our guide to understand that caring for others is the keystone that secures the Beloved Community.

When we are growing up, most people are taught the “keystone” of society – the “Golden Rule” in some form or another. Do you remember it from last week? We see the Golden Rule in Luke 6:31: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” For people who profess to follow Jesus, this is more than a rule – it is a commandment from God.



Long before the Gospel of Luke was written, the Golden Rule, the keystone, appeared in the form of The Shema prayer that has been central to Judaism. In today's Christianity, we are tempted to believe that Jesus is a white, middle-class male American. However, to understand the fullness of the greatest commandments, we must remember that Jesus is a Jewish rabbi of Middle Eastern descent from Nazareth, a place once described in scripture as a place that nothing good comes from. Jesus quotes the scrolls of Torah, which Christians know as the first five books of the Old Testament.

Jesus would have known the 613+ laws that religious Jewish people were compelled to know from memory and to follow. There were steep consequences for breaking these laws – you could lose everything, including your life. This is why, when we arrive at the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, people ask Jesus – which of these 613+ laws is the most important? Jesus replies: The Shema is the most important law, the keystone.

The *Shema*, which means to listen, hear AND act, appears in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy would have been one of the TORAH scrolls read in the Temple, and it is filled with rules for living. These rules were given to Israel by Moses so that they would know how to live in a way that pleases God.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DISCOVER WEEK 3)**

Let's take some time to consider these questions.

Read Deuteronomy 6:1-9. The Shema is contained in verses 6:4-5.

"Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,<sup>2</sup> so that you and your children and your children's children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.<sup>3</sup> Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

**<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. <sup>5</sup>You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.**

<sup>6</sup>Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup>Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup>Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, <sup>9</sup>and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Shema, translated as "Hear," means to listen, hear and act. It is not simply to open your ears. But it means paying attention and governing your behavior based on what you hear.

Other translations of the Bible use words like loyalty and will (for heart), being (for soul), and capacity (for might). What synonyms or other descriptive words might you use?

According to Deuteronomy 6, what are we listening to? What are we hearing?

What are we paying attention to?

Who do we love? How?

How do we behave based on what we've heard?

If someone watched a video of your life, who or what would they say is your god? Who or what do you love with all your heart, soul, and might? Based on your current life and priorities, what is the most important thing you teach the people around you?

### **DEVELOP (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)**

Together, let's develop how we can apply what we have learned about Beloved Community and understand how to implement these scriptural principles in our lives.  
*(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

The greatest commandment and the hardest action facing Christians today is love. In Matthew 22:36, the religious leaders of the time are frustrated that Jesus is calling people to accountability and challenging their power. Jesus is not among the most powerful, established and recognized teachers or leaders. Yet, Jesus is answering questions about the law that only powerful religious teachers with the approved educational pedigree are supposed to be able to answer. They issue a test when they ask Jesus, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus responds: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>14</sup>

When Jesus responds, Jesus is summarizing the 613+ laws in Deuteronomy and the 700+ laws in Leviticus that ruled the life of the Israelites together. Jesus explains that if you love God and love people, you follow all the rules. There is no longer a need to memorize almost 1400 laws. Because of Jesus, everything else will follow if we focus on loving God and loving people.

But don’t miss this! Jesus is also explaining the inverse – if we do not love God and we do not love people, everything else will fall apart. This is illustrated more clearly in the parallel scripture, Luke 10:25-28 and 29-37. Jesus says to the “expert in the law”, “love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” If you “do this, ...you will live.” Which also means that if you don’t do this, you will die. If you fail to love God and love neighbor, life is less lifelike according to Jesus. You are walking away from abundant life, which is a form of death.

### **DESIGN (SUGGESTED TIME: 20 MINUTES)**

Together, let’s consider how to create the Beloved Community as a reality in our own lives and how the Beloved Community is a real possibility within the church.

*(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

This love that the Shema and Jesus refer to is *agape* love. It is radically transforming love that requires the action of courageous people. It chooses the man who was beaten and robbed in Luke 10:30 over the tradition of Samaritans not engaging with Israelites. *Agape* love chooses people over power. It chooses grace over gossip. It chooses dialogue over conjecture. It chooses courage over comfort. *Agape* love, the love required to love God

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 22:36 (NRSVue)

<sup>13</sup> Leviticus 19:18 (NRSVue): You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 22:37-40 (NRSVue)

and people, is counter cultural. It lives outside of the status quo and any societal norms. One can only serve one god – who/what will it be?

The truth of the matter is that, in the United States, capitalism has become our god. Look around. Every decision, including in the church, is made based on the bottom line – the almighty dollar. Rev. Jasmine Rose Simmons shares that when she talks to people who seek to follow Jesus but who oppose universal healthcare, sensible gun control, women's health rights, public education, equitable policies for women and people of color in the workplace, civil rights for families in every shape or form that they come, affordable housing initiatives, and other ways to care for others, these people of God point out that they will not vote for these measures primarily because of the economic impact in society. Simply stated, they contend it costs too much money.

Jesus would take issue with this assertion. The Shema, the Levitical laws, and the greatest commandments would all lead us to what Jesus declared: If we love God with everything we have and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, we will all live.

Let's think about this together:

- If no one is hungry, people are less likely to steal.
- If no one is homeless, people are less likely to break in.
- If no one is sick and cannot receive the care that they need, people are less likely to self-medicate using drugs and alcohol.
- If people are cared for in their minds, people are less likely to strike out in anger using catastrophic weapons.
- If we share the earth's resources instead of fighting over them, we will spend a lot less money on defense spending and have a lot more money for education and peace initiatives.

Here is how one scripture helps us understand the difference between living in fear of scarcity and living out of love:

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because [God] first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." 1 John 4:18-21 (NRSVUE)



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DESIGN WEEK 3)

- In what ways are we fearful about caring for others? How does our fear show up in our everyday life?

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- What keeps us from caring for others? How have we been complicit in not caring for others as a society?

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- The prophet Jeremiah reminds us, “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”<sup>15</sup> Think about your everyday life. Think about your community, your block, your neighborhood, your city and your state. What can you do to care for those with whom you come in contact?

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- How can we listen (*Shema – to listen, hear and act*) with empathy and compassion for others as a way of caring for others?

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- What would it take to build “increasing levels of trust and work[ing] to avoid fear of difference and others”?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah 29:7 (NRSVue)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

How could the church community “focus energy on removing evil forces (unjust systems), taking care not to destroy people”? <sup>17</sup>

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Considering the keystone, **dream deeper**. Add to or edit the vision of the Beloved Community that you expanded and edited last week. What could the Beloved Community of today look like?

Caring for everyone is not optional. Caring for everyone is the greatest commandment from God. We cannot love God if we do not love people. We cannot love people if we do not care for people. When we figure out how to care for people, we will live. This is the shared truth of the people of God. This is the keystone. This is how we build the Beloved Community.

### **BUILD: (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Together, let's continue to build the Beloved Community. This week, we focus on the Keystone. The keystone "locks" or secures the Beloved Community. Caring for others is the keystone of the Beloved Community. (*Read aloud the actions to take – and some to avoid – in the coming week.*)

Look for ways to care for others. Think about the spiritual, personal, systemic and global implications of not caring for your neighbors. Make a list of ways that you did and did not care for others this week. Bring it to class next week.

Listen to the song "If I Can Help Somebody" by Mahalia Jackson. Write down and meditate on the lyrics as a part of your prayer and devotional time. [Listen [here](#) as sung by Ted Jenifer in worship at Atlanta First UMC in January 2024.]

### **CLOSING (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Let's review and close with prayer.

**BLOCK:** Keystone

**THEME:** Shared Truth

**PRINCIPLE:** Caring for others.

### **REMEMBER**

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

*Matthew 22:37b-39 (NRSVUE)*

### **ACTION FOR THE WEEK**

Look for ways to care for others. Make a list of the ways that you did not care for others. Bring both experiences to class next week.

Agape love is the Beloved Community in action. **The Cornerstone** helps us recognize and honor the image of God in every person. The **Foundation** calls us all to personal authenticity and respect for all others. We affirm our differences and do not erase differences as we all form the foundation for Beloved Community. The **Keystone** reminds us that caring for others secures the Beloved Community.

**IMPORTANT HOMEWORK PRIOR TO WEEK 4:** To prepare for the Week 4 lesson, students should watch a Frontline episode on the work of Jane Elliott, a diversity and anti-racism educator, for more than six decades: Frontline, "A Class Divided," March 26, 1985 (53 min). Season 1985: Episode 9: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/class-divided/> (*If feasible, send the link to the full documentary to the group to watch before the next class. If people have limited internet access, consider providing an opportunity to show the clip to the entire class.*)

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The King Center – What is the Beloved Community: <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

GCORR – The 25 traits of the Beloved Community: <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

General Commission of Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church (GCORR): [GCORR.org](http://GCORR.org)

The Bible Project – [www.bibleproject.com](http://www.bibleproject.com)

[Video] The Shema – The Bible Project: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/shema-listen/>

[Article] What is The Shema? – The Bible Project: <https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-is-the-shema/>

[Video] The Law – The Bible Project: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/law/>

The UMC Council of Bishops “Mid-term State of the United Methodist Church Address: Press Release: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-united-methodist-church-called-to-a-revival-of-beloved-community>

Full Address: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/reclaim-revive-renew-the-necessity-of-union-among-us>



# WEEK 4

# SMALL GROUP SESSION

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## OPENING (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)

(Begin with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to give everyone an open heart and a learning spirit. Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.)

Let's begin with a brief review of what we studied last time.

- We considered The Keystone: Shared Truth.
- We considered the guiding principle of Caring for Everyone.

Our memory verse was:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind! This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” *Matthew 22:37b-39 (NRSVUE)*

Let's share what we learned during the week about how we intentionally cared for others and how we did not care for others. Be honest and vulnerable. Remember all we share together is confidential.

This week's lesson is:

The Capstone: The Inclusivity of Reconciliation.

Our guiding principle is:

Radical Inclusivity and Hospitality

Here are some grounding scriptures for our study today and throughout the week:

Acts 2:14-47, 1 John 1:5-10, 2:8-14,17.

Our memory verse for this lesson is:

"God is light and in [God] there is no darkness at all." *1 John 1:5b (NRSVUE)*

Let's read the scripture together.

(All read aloud.)

Let everyone say, "Amen!"

### **DISCOVER (SUGGESTED TIME: 20 MINUTES)**

The first church gathered through the gift of the Holy Spirit, focusing on diversity, a commitment to demonstrate turning away from a community failure and a determination to include anyone who would live in a new understanding of the love and generosity that Jesus taught. The Acts 2 church is the Beloved Community in action. This is *agape* love in action.

The Beloved Community, the Acts 2 church and the Kingdom of God all require the action of recognition and repentance. It's hard to get along and love our neighbor if one or more parties refuse to recognize and acknowledge that hurtful behavior exists in their relationship. Whether personal, communal, historical or present-day, hurtful behavior permeates interaction between people for generations.

For the people of God, separating people based on or tribe or category is as old as the book of Genesis. Genesis 11:8 says, "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city." Why? They tried to reach the heavens. In other words, they tried to become God. But even before then, humans had gotten so out of control that God flooded the earth. The God-given "dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" <sup>18</sup> has never been enough for humanity.

Brothers murder and fight each other (Cain and Abel). Pedigree overtakes humanity (Lot's daughters). Jealousy overrules sanity (Jacob and Esau). Fathers send children away (Hagar and Ishmael). And brothers break into tribes – blessed and cursed by their father (Joseph and his brothers). Sin pervades. People tend to resist God's design of relationship and *agape* love. But then, Jesus shows up.

Jesus comes to "bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." <sup>19</sup> Jesus comes to teach, clarify, align, heal and love. Jesus comes as an

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<sup>18</sup> Genesis 1:28 (NRSV)

<sup>19</sup> Luke 4:18-19 (NRSVue)

unlikely messenger so that all may hear and experience the love of God. And yet, Jesus is turned over by the religious elite on false charges and executed by the state. So, everyone is reeling by the time we get to Acts 2. What has just happened? How do we make sense of the promises of God? What does it mean that we will see the goodness of God in the land of the living (Psalm 27:13)?

Let's look at Acts 2 together. Recall the Pentecost experience from week two – Acts 2:1-12. This is the reversal of God scattering God's people in Genesis 11. The totality of the Pentecost experience in Acts 2:1-43 represents drawing together God's people, recognition of painful separation and the inclusivity of reconciliation. The first church practices radical inclusivity and hospitality. But first, it repents, receives the Holy Spirit, and calls itself apart from the "corrupt generation."<sup>20</sup>

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DISCOVER WEEK 4)**

Let's take some time to consider these questions.

Read Acts 2:14-47 aloud. Have different readers read different sections: Acts 2:14-36 (Peter Addresses the Crowd); Acts 2:37-42 (The First Converts); Acts 2:43-47 (Life Among the Believers).<sup>21</sup> (After each section is read, silently write down what you've heard.)

- According to Peter, what promises has God kept?

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- What is Peter teaching the new church?

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<sup>20</sup> Acts 2:40

<sup>21</sup> Section breaks from NRSVue

- What is required to be a part of the church?

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- What do radical inclusivity and hospitality look like?

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- What do you learn about the original design of the church?

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Acts 2 teaches us some basic principles about being in a community:

1. Recognize where you have been wrong or have hurt someone.
2. Acknowledge the privilege or prejudice that you carry. [Privilege requires power and is provided by an outside source or societal construct like race or socioeconomic status; prejudice is an internal preconceived notion gained based on negative assumptions.]
3. Confess and repent. Repent means to turn away from. Repentance is not simply an apology; it is a behavior change.
4. Create a space where everyone feels safe.
5. Radically welcome all people.
6. Share all that God has given you. Cultivate glad and generous hearts.
7. Praise God and gain the goodwill of all people.



Acts 2 begs the question, what has happened to the church and the people who believed? The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed segregation in most businesses and public places. All these decades later, the church remains one of the most segregated institutions in America. Sunday mornings at eleven o'clock remains the most segregated hour of the week in America, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described it.<sup>22</sup> The church has been a bastion for the cause of slavery, segregation, the KKK, hatred, bigotry and discrimination. The church has twisted the words of the Bible to keep people oppressed and captive. Why? This is far from the design of the first church in Acts.



#### **DEVELOP (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)**

Together, let's develop how we can apply what we have learned about Beloved Community and understand how to implement these scriptural principles in our lives. (Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)

So far in our study of building Beloved Community, we've learned that in construction, the Cornerstone – usually the first stone set – is a ceremonial stone that is placed in one of the corners of a building's foundation. It usually marks the beginning of construction and sometimes contains inscriptions such as the date or other details. The Foundation is the lowest part of a building's structure – typically below ground level – and it provides stable support for everything that is built on top of it. Another important stone is the Keystone, which is positioned at the top of an arch. It locks all the other stones into position, which is essential for the arch's stability and strength.

This week, we add the Capstone, also known as a coping stone. The capstone is the topmost stone or component of a structure, like a wall or building. It gives a protective and finishing touch to the construction. The capstone "caps" in all of

the good elements that the building needs to stand strong and weather any storm that may come its way. It also “caps” out all of the elements that could cause damage to the building, like water, snow and wind.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DEVELOP WEEK 4)**

- What will it take for the church to become a capstone in the community that “caps” out the sin of exclusivity and “caps” in the blessing of radical inclusivity and hospitality?

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- What will it take to be an Acts 2 church?

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- What will it take to be the Beloved Community?

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#### **DESIGN (SUGGESTED TIME: 25 MINUTES)**

Together, let's consider how to create the Beloved Community as a reality in our own lives and how the Beloved Community is a real possibility within the church.

Watch a short video excerpt of the work of Jane Elliott, a diversity and anti-racism educator for more than six decades. Students should have watched the Frontline episode “A Class Divided,” March 26, 1985 (53 min). Season 1985: Episode 9: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/class-divided/> prior to class. Or the class may decide to watch the entire episode together.

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<sup>22</sup> “Interview with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, Accessed April 1, 2024, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/interview-meet-press.>

(A word of caution: This video might cause painful memories of discrimination or participation in discriminatory behaviors. You might have strong reactions. Our purpose is to focus on the impact of Jane Elliott's work and how it can help us build the Beloved Community.)

*(Show one of the video clips of Jane Elliott's work – listed in Additional Resources – that fits your time and context.)*

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DESIGN WEEK 4)**

What did you hear? What did you see? What did you feel?

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What did you learn?

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What surprised you?

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What do you think you'll still remember a month from now?

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Why does an awareness of “white privilege” or “white superiority” matter? What confession and/or repentance is required to extend radical inclusivity and hospitality? (Listen closely to what persons of color might add to this conversation and vice versa.)

In light of what you learned from this video, what will you do to build the Beloved Community? What must the church do to build the Beloved Community?

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The capstone of the Beloved Community is radical inclusivity and hospitality. This requires an awareness of how we show up in the world. Self-awareness around personal, communal, historical and present-day behaviors informs our awareness of our own privilege, prejudice and perception. Acknowledgment, recognition, repentance and reconciliation of our own biases, experiences, perceptions and behaviors lead us to gain the “goodwill of all people” and a place where we can live in the inclusivity of reconciliation like the Acts 2 church.

Considering the Capstone, dream deeper. Add to or edit the vision of the Beloved Community that you designed and edited last week. What could the Beloved Community of today look like?

Read 1 John 1:5-10 and 2:8-14,17. How will you be an “in the light” capstone this week?

**BUILD: (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Together, let's continue to build the Beloved Community. This week, we focus on the Capstone. The capstone protects the Beloved Community. Radical inclusivity and hospitality provide the capstone of the Beloved Community

*(Read aloud the actions to take – and some to avoid – in the coming week.)*

Look for ways that people are treated differently in your community. Look for ways that people are welcomed differently in your community. Please make a list and bring it to class next week.

If you didn't watch the full documentary on Jane Elliott's work, "A Class Divided," be sure to do so following this session. – FRONTLINE PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/class-divided/>

**CLOSING (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Let's review and close with prayer.

**BLOCK:** Capstone

**THEME:** The Inclusivity of Reconciliation

**PRINCIPLE:** Radical Inclusivity and Hospitality

**REMEMBER**

"God is light and in [God] there is no darkness at all." 1 John 1:5b (NRSVUE)

**ACTION FOR THE WEEK**

Look for ways that people are treated differently in your community. Look for ways that people are "welcomed" differently in your community. Please make a list and bring it to class next week.

Watch the Frontline episode, "A Class Divided," March 26, 1985 (53 min). Season 1985: Episode 9: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/class-divided/>.

Agape love is the Beloved Community in action. The **Cornerstone** helps us recognize and honor the image of God in every person. The **Foundation** calls us all to personal authenticity and respect for all others. We affirm our differences and do not erase differences as we all form the foundation for Beloved Community. The **Keystone** reminds us that caring for others secures the Beloved Community. Radical inclusivity and hospitality provide the **Capstone** that protects the Beloved Community.

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The King Center – What is the Beloved Community: <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

GCORR – The 25 traits of the Beloved Community: <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

General Commission of Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church (GCORR): [GCORR.org](http://GCORR.org)

VIDEO: A Class Divided (full documentary) – FRONTLINE PBS: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/class-divided/> (runtime 53 minutes - you can show up to 9:50 in class or other clips that you determine helpful for your context)

VIDEO: Anti-Racism Educator Jane Elliott: 'There's Only One Race. The Human Race' | NBC BLK | NBC News: <https://www.nbcnews.com/video/anti-racism-educator-jane-elliott-there-s-only-one-race-the-human-race-1058048579664> (runtime 3:35; Accessibility note: this video requires quick reading of the printed text.)

VIDEO: Jane Elliott's Brown Eye/Blue Eye Test: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2z-ahJ4uws> (runtime 4:39)

VIDEO: Jane Elliott of Her "Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes Exercise" and Fighting Racism on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2z-ahJ4uws> (runtime 7:16; Accessibility note: This video includes captions and is an excellent clip for people of all accessibility levels.)



# WEEK 5

# SMALL GROUP SESSION

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## OPENING (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)

(Begin with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to give everyone an open heart and a learning spirit. Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.)

Let's begin with a brief review of what we studied last time.

- We considered The Capstone: The Inclusivity of Reconciliation.
- We considered the guiding principle of Caring for Everyone.

Our memory verse was:

"God is light and in [God] there is no darkness at all." *1 John 1:5b (NRSVUE)*

Let's share what we learned during the week about how people in our communities are treated and welcomed differently. Also, what impacted you in the PBS documentary on Jane Elliott and the Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes Exercise? Be honest and vulnerable. Remember all we share together is confidential.

This week's lesson is:

The Mortar: The Freedom of Justice.

Our guiding principles are:

Eliminating poverty, hunger and hate while sharing resources and the wealth of the earth equitably.

Here are some grounding scriptures for our study today and throughout the week.

Acts 2:41-47, Amos 5:(4, 7, 11-15, 21-24).

Our memory verse for this lesson is:

“But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” *Amos 5:24 (NRSVUE)*

Let's read the scripture together.

(All read aloud.)

Let everyone say, “Amen!”



#### **DISCOVER (SUGGESTED**

**TIME: 25 MINUTES)**

Together, let's discover some of the history and application of the concept of Beloved Community. *(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

Mortar is a paste that binds building blocks such as bricks, stones and concrete masonry units together. It fills and seals gaps between them and can even add decorative colors or patterns to walls. In its broadest sense, mortar can be made from asphalt, soft mud or clay, as used between mud bricks. But the most common types used today are made from water, sand and a binder like cement or lime. When it sets, mortar becomes hard, resulting in a robust structure crucial for construction projects to maintain structural integrity and weatherproofing.

Justice is the mortar of the Beloved Community. Justice is the binding agent that holds the blocks together. Without justice, we will always be concerned that the Cornerstone (recognizing and honoring the image of God in every person), the Foundation (personal authenticity and respect), the Keystone (caring for others), and the Capstone (radical inclusivity and hospitality) will fall, and the Beloved Community will not be able to stand.

The Hebrew word used in Amos 5:24 for justice, *מִשְׁפָט* *mišpāṭ*<sup>23</sup>, means judgment, justice, law, equality, or equity, a fair sentence or judgment regardless of social status or race.

The Hebrew word used in Amos 5:24 for righteousness, *צִדְקָה* *tsedaqah*,<sup>24</sup> is often translated in English-language Bible translations as righteousness, honesty, right, justice, triumphs, deeds, equity, deliverance, vindication or rightness.

In Greek, in the New Testament, justice is translated as righteousness more times than not. This is why some people believe justice is not mentioned much in the New Testament. Together, justice and righteousness are mentioned over 400 times in the Bible. If you add the theme of poverty, the three themes are mentioned over 2000 times in the Bible.

**Option A:** Watch the video “Justice” from The Bible Project.

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/justice/>

In Isaiah, the Bible declares the Lord is a God of justice: “Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore [the Lord] will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for [the Lord]”<sup>25</sup> . Psalm 33:5 proclaims that the Lord “loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.” The gospel of Luke joins the chorus in highlighting God’s commitment to justice: “And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, having been baptized with John’s baptism.”<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most widely known calls to justice and righteousness appear in the minor prophets, Micah 6:8 “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” and Amos 5:24: “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

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<sup>23</sup> G/K Number: h05477; Strong’s Number: H4941 from 8199, NIV Word Study Dictionary and NRSVue Strong’s Bible

<sup>24</sup> Strong’s Number: h6666, NRSVue Strong’s Bible

<sup>25</sup> Isaiah 30:18 (NRSVue)

<sup>26</sup> Luke 7:29 (NRSVue)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DISCOVER WEEK 5)

Let's take some time to consider these questions.

Option B: Let's read selections from Amos 5

“<sup>4</sup>For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: Seek me and live...<sup>7</sup>Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! ... <sup>11</sup>Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.<sup>12</sup>For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.<sup>13</sup>Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.<sup>14</sup>Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.<sup>15</sup>Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.<sup>16</sup>Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, “Alas! alas!” They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; <sup>17</sup>in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the Lord. ... <sup>21</sup>I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.<sup>22</sup>Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. <sup>23</sup>Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. <sup>24</sup>But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Amos 5:4, 7, 11-15, 21-24 (NRSVUE)

What does Amos teach us about God, justice and righteousness?

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Last week, we learned that the first church, the Acts 2 church, gathered through the gift of the Holy Spirit, focusing on diversity, a commitment to demonstrate turning away from a community failure, and a determination to include anyone who would live in a new understanding of the love and generosity that Jesus taught. This week, we see the Acts 2 church in action as the mortar in the Beloved Community.

Let's read Acts 2:41-47.

“So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.<sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and

had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

- Where do you see the Act 2 community acting as mortar?

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- How would the Acts 2 church define justice?

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- How do you define justice today? How do you define justice in the Bible? How do you define justice in the community? What are some other words that we can use for justice?

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- Where have you seen justice at work in the world? Where have you seen justice at work in church?

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- Where have you seen the absence of justice in the church? Where have you seen the absence of justice in the world?

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Do your siblings in Christ agree or disagree with you? Why do you think that is the case?

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The Beloved Community recognizes reality for what it is. It sees injustice, and it seeks to repair and eliminate the injustice that is present. It does this by eliminating poverty, hunger, and hate, allowing the equitable sharing of resources, and allowing the sharing of the wealth of the earth.

Reciprocal justice or the law of retaliation, is established in Exodus 21:23-27. The practice, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” is reciprocal justice. God reverses and revokes reciprocal justice in the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew 5:38-48.

**Restorative justice** is a framework for justice in the Bible that emphasizes repairing harm, reconciling relationships, and restoring wholeness. It is a form of justice that advocates seeking out the vulnerable rather than just punishing the evil action. Restorative justice seeks to prevent evil actions through eliminating the cause of the action. Eliminating poverty, hunger, and hate through the sharing of equitable sharing of resources and wealth of the earth would eliminate the need from most crimes that are committed and adjudicated through the retributive justice found in the American justice system. The goal of God’s restorative justice is preventative and the achievement of full restoration of the relationship between God and humans.

Retributive justice, also known as punishment, is a concept in the Bible based on Deuteronomy 27:11-28:68. This passage discusses the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience. The idea is to punish the guilty person in a way that their actions deserve. We profess to practice retributive justice in the American justice system today. Humanity requires some retributive justice to move to restorative justice. Ideally, as people of faith, we seek restorative justice to accomplish retributive justice. However, retributive justice in America often does not follow the rule of equitable punishment based on what actions deserve. Too frequently, retributive justice is confused with reciprocal justice or is tied up in the sin of racism and socio-economic discrimination. This makes our understanding of retributive justice tricky. Ideally, retributive justice is an agent of restorative justice which returns the offender to right relationship with God and people and restores them to full membership in the Beloved Community.

The Beloved Community seeks both God's restorative and retributive justice in all areas of life so that everyone is included in actualizing God's promise of abundant life. Yet, the **Beloved Community privileges restorative justice over retributive justice through forgiveness and reconciliation.**



Restorative justice sets the entire community free. Restorative justice leads to liberation and full inclusion. Restorative justice eliminates poverty, hunger, and hatred because restorative justice releases people from the fear of not having enough and the fear of someone else taking their place of privilege and fulfillment.

Practicing restorative justice leads to the equitable sharing of resources because we understand that everything we have is a gift from God to be shared so that all would have what they need.

Restorative justice also leads to sharing the wealth of the earth because we understand that God has placed enough on this planet for everyone. Restorative justice repairs harm, reconciles relationships, and restores wholeness so that all may be free to experience abundant life.

Read these scripture passages for examples of restorative justice: Psalm 146:7-9, Hosea 12:6, Isaiah 30:18, Isaiah 53, Matthew 5:6, 6:33 and 23:23, and Romans 1:16-17.

- Where do you see restorative justice?

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- What does God require of humans in restorative justice?

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- What can humans depend on from God in restorative justice?

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#### **DESIGN (SUGGESTED TIME: 15 MINUTES)**

Together, let's consider how to create the Beloved Community as a reality in our own lives and how the Beloved Community is a real possibility within the church.

Fear often keeps us from freely seeking restorative justice. Fear that the proper punishment will not be administered. Fear that rehabilitation will fail. Fear that the offender will offend again. In his sermon, *Antidotes for Fear*<sup>27</sup>, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, focuses on 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and [whoever] fears is not perfected in love." The sermon begins, "In these days of catastrophic change and calamitous uncertainty, is there any man who does not experience the depression and bewilderment of crippling fear, which, like a nagging hound of hell, pursues our every footstep?"

Dr. King does not recommend eliminating fear all together from human life, saying: "fear is the elemental alarm system of the human organism that warns of approaching dangers..." He continues, "Fear...is a powerfully creative force." He says, "Normal fear protects us; abnormal fear paralyzes us."

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<sup>27</sup> King, Martin Luther, *Strength to Love*, Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2010.



Dr. King preaches that “abnormal fear” should be challenged head-on. Dr. King says: First, “face our fears and honestly ask why we are afraid.” Second, “master fear through... courage.” Third, “fear is mastered through love. Fourth, “fear is mastered through faith.” Dr. King points us to the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:26-31 – “so do not be afraid.”

Fear keeps us captive. It is fear that keeps us from loving our neighbors and loving our enemies. Fear makes us believe that justice for another is harmful to us. It is fear that preserves privilege, poverty, hunger and hatred. It is fear that resists restoration and wholeness. It is fear that seeks retaliation rather than justice. It is fear that privileges injustice over justice. It is fear that resists equitable sharing of resources. Fear closes grocery stores and resists bringing healthy food to certain communities, creating food deserts and insecurity. Fear sets up unjust systems that keep the poor, poor; the hungry, hungry; and the hated, hated. It is fear that has made justice a bad word. It is fear, and the cowardice represented as fear, which abhors equality, equity, justice and inclusion.

But God! God does not give us a spirit of fear! God gave us “a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” <sup>28</sup> Recognizing the truth and working for justice in poverty, hunger, hatred, and more leads to freedom. Jesus said, “...and the truth will make you free.” <sup>29</sup>

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DESIGN WEEK 5)**

- What keeps you from working for justice in your community? What are you afraid of?

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- What are the ways that we are kept from freedom because we refuse to work for justice?

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- Considering the Mortar, dream deeper. Add to or edit the vision of the Beloved Community that you designed and edited last week. What could the Beloved Community of today look like?

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### **BUILD: (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Together, let's continue to build the Beloved Community. This week, we focus on the Mortar. The mortar holds the Beloved Community together. Justice, including eliminating poverty, hunger, and hate, the equitable sharing of resources, and the sharing of the earth's wealth, is the Beloved Community's mortar.

*(Read aloud the actions to take – and some to avoid – in the coming week.)*

Consider times you resisted justice? Why did you resist? Consider times when have you sought out justice? Why did you seek justice? Look for examples of justice, especially restorative justice, in the news and your life this week. Share with the class at the last session next week.

### **CLOSING (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Let's review and close with prayer.

**BLOCK:** Mortar

**THEME:** The Freedom of Justice

**PRINCIPLE:**

Eliminating poverty, hunger, and hate while sharing resources and the wealth of the earth equitably.

### **REMEMBER**

"But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Amos 5:24 (NRSVUE)

### **ACTION FOR THE WEEK**

Consider your own resistance and embrace of justice. Look for examples of justice, especially restorative justice, in the news and your life this week. Share with the class at the last session.

Agape love is the Beloved Community in action. The **Cornerstone** helps us recognize and honor the image of God in every person. The **Foundation** calls us all to personal authenticity and respect for all others. We affirm our differences and do not erase differences as we all form the foundation for Beloved Community. The **Keystone** reminds us that caring for others secures the Beloved Community. Radical inclusivity and hospitality provide the **Capstone** that protects the Beloved Community. Justice is the **Mortar** that holds the Beloved Community together and includes working to eliminate poverty, hunger and hate as well as equitable sharing of resources.

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<sup>28</sup> Timothy 1:7 (NRSVue)

<sup>29</sup> John 8:32 (NRSVue)

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The King Center - What is the Beloved Community: <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

GCORR – The 25 traits of the Beloved Community: <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

General Commission of Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church (GCORR): [GCORR.org](http://GCORR.org)

King Jr., Martin Luther. Strength to Love. Fortress Press. 2010 Gift Edition.

Video: The Bible Project - Justice. <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/justice/>



# WEEK 6

# SMALL GROUP SESSION

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## OPENING (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)

(Begin with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to give everyone an open heart and a learning spirit. Pray extemporaneously or select a prayer from the resources section.)

Let's begin with a brief review of what we studied last time.

- We considered The Mortar: The Freedom of Justice.
- We considered the guiding principle of Eliminating poverty, hunger and hate through the sharing of resources and the wealth of the earth equitably.

Our memory verse was:

“But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

*Amos 5:24 (NRSVUE)*

Let's share what we learned during the week as we looked for examples of justice, especially restorative justice, in the news and in our lives. Be honest and vulnerable. Remember all we share together is confidential.

This week's lesson is:

The Roof: A Vision of the Beloved Community.

Our guiding principles are:

Peace with Justice, Interdependence, Personal Responsibility

Here are some grounding scriptures for our study today and throughout the week:

Acts 2:43-47, Micah 6:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 1 Corinthians 13.

Our memory verse for this lesson is:

"[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

*Micah 6:8 (NRSVUE)*

Let's read the scripture together.

(All read aloud.)

Let everyone say, "Amen!"



### **DISCOVER (SUGGESTED TIME: 10 MINUTES)**

Together, let's discover some of the history and application of the concept of Beloved Community. *(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)*

Over the past five weeks, we have embarked upon a journey to define, understand, and build the Beloved Community right where we are. We learned that the Beloved Community is an inclusive, peace-filled, reconciled community demonstrating God's action-oriented, justice-driven, *agape* love.

The Beloved Community is unencumbered by poverty, racism, sexism, hunger, homelessness – anything that seeks to separate or prevent us from living the abundant life that Christ promised. In the Beloved Community, love and trust overcome fear and hatred.

We learned that everyone is made in the image of God. This is the Cornerstone of Beloved Community. Invitation, authenticity and living the greatest commandments build up the image of God in ourselves and others. We see Jesus, first rejected, then celebrated, as the chief cornerstone, the



anchor of the community.

The **Foundation**, showing personal authenticity and respect toward our neighbors, enables us to be bound together as a community while we affirm our differences rather than trying to erase them.

Caring for everyone is the **Keystone** of the Beloved Community. The keystone holds up the arch/doorway allowing the community to be open to all. Understanding our shared truth, loving God and loving God's people leads to life and allows us to care for all.

The **Capstone** keeps in the things that we need to live and keeps out the things that destroy the community. The capstone is radical inclusivity and hospitality. Inclusivity is more than diversity. Inclusivity integrates diversity so that everyone is reconciled and at peace with one another.

Justice is the **Mortar** of the Beloved Community. The mortar is the glue that holds the community together. Eliminating poverty, hunger and hate; the equitable sharing of resources; and sharing the earth's wealth leads to an equitable, justice-acting community that casts out fear through love and allows everyone to live in freedom.

This week, we complete our building by installing the **Roof**. The roof structure, such as trusses or rafters, can be installed once the supporting walls are in place. Following this, sheathing, underlayment and then the final roofing materials (shingles, tiles, metal, etc.) are applied. After the roof is in place and the building is "dried in" (protected from water), interior work such as electrical, plumbing, insulation, and drywall can



proceed, alongside exterior finishing work.

From the roof, we can see a vision of the Beloved Community. A lot of people never see the community from the roof. They are distracted by what is right in front of them. We have a hard time believing that something we cannot see in our everyday life is truth. This is why we sometimes downplay or deny that someone has encountered an experience we have not been exposed to. When we are buried in what we can easily see, it is difficult to imagine what we could see from a different perspective.

We can see a more extensive, perspective-changing, more inclusive picture of what is happening around us from the roof. From the roof, we can see community needs that don't exist in our immediate circle, such as poverty, hunger, homelessness, children who are on their own, etc. We can see pain and suffering from the perspective of the roof that we have not been exposed to ourselves – like how the minimum wage does not cover the cost of a one-bedroom apartment in most major cities.

From the roof, we can see how interdependent we are with one another.

**DEVELOP (SUGGESTED TIME: 25**

## **MINUTES)**

Together, let's develop how we can apply what we have learned about Beloved Community and understand how to implement these scriptural principles in our lives.  
(Read aloud the following content, inviting others in the study to help.)

From the roof, we can see the need for the peace that comes with justice in our world. We can understand that peace will not just fall out of the sky, but peace is a function, an outcome of the Biblical restorative justice we discussed last week.

The work of peace with justice, together, will lead us to the kind of community that God expects from us. The saying is true, "no justice, no peace." If people are hungry or lack basic needs, we will have crime. As long as we have crime, we will have fear. Fear will pervade society and push aside love if we allow it to do so.

1 John 4:18-21 (NRSVUE) reminds us:

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because [God] first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [Christ] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

Peace brought about by restorative justice brings about perfect love.

The roof expands our vision. The view from the roof helps us see how to bring the Beloved Community to fruition.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DEVELOP WEEK 6)**

Let's take some time to consider these questions.

First let's read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31:

<sup>12</sup>"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. <sup>14</sup>Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup>And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as [God] chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup>The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' <sup>22</sup>On the contrary, the members of



the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,<sup>23</sup>and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;<sup>24</sup>whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member,<sup>25</sup>that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.<sup>26</sup>If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.<sup>28</sup>And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.<sup>29</sup>Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?<sup>30</sup>Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?<sup>31</sup>But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

- Who is the Beloved Community made up of?

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- Who is important in the Beloved Community?

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- What are we to do with those we deem “weaker,” “less honorable,” “less respectable,” and “inferior” members of the body?

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- What if someone is suffering? What are we to do?

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Is everyone the same? Does everyone have the same gift? What are we to do about the gifts?

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Now, let's read 1 Corinthians 13:

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

- What is the "more excellent way?"

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- If I do everything right and do not love, what happens?

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- According to 1 Corinthians 13, do our motives matter? If so, why?

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- The Apostle Paul repeats the phrase. "...we know only in part..." What do you think this means?

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- In 1 Corinthians 13:13, how do faith, hope, and love inform the discussion about peace with justice? What do faith, hope, and love teach us about justice and peace?

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- The last phrase of the scripture says, "...and the greatest of these is love." What is the point of the Beloved Community? Why is it important that we build the Beloved Community? What must we each do to help realize the Beloved Community on this side of life?

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#### **DESIGN (SUGGESTED TIME: 20 MINUTES)**

Together, let's consider how to create the Beloved Community as a reality in our own lives and how the Beloved Community is a real possibility within the church.

Micah is one of the twelve minor prophets. If you flip too quickly through the end of the Old Testament, you can easily miss it. We don't know much about Micah, but we do know that God used Micah to remind people how important it is to resist injustice and work for justice. In Micah, people are expecting restoration. God reminds the people that restoration requires justice. The prophet Micah condemns idolatry, injustice, false preaching, corrupt leadership and worship without justice. Micah also provides hope for a future of peace and restoration paved by justice.

Micah 6:1 begins, “Hear what the Lord says...’O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery...so that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.’” Then, the people ask what they need to do so that God will no longer be angry with them and cease punishing them. The prophet replies in verse 8, “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

To build the Beloved Community, the people of God must learn to love God and love our neighbors with the agape love that Jesus teaches. Our love for God and God’s people must become more important than self-preservation. If the goal is self-preservation, we will not realize the Beloved Community. If the goal is abundant life in Jesus, we will build a community that allows all people to experience abundant life.

We will work for justice through the elimination of barriers and systems that keep people hungry, homeless, uneducated, in poverty, in despair and hated. We will eliminate the “isms” in the world and work for the radical inclusion of God’s children in every imaginable way. We will work for a society that champions health and wholeness over separation and preservation. We will seek justice, we will do justice, we will love kindness, and we will walk humbly with the God of restoration.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (DESIGN WEEK 6)**

- What will it take to build the Beloved Community in your context?  
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\_\_\_\_\_
- Dream deeper. Add to or edit the vision of the Beloved Community that you edited last week. What could the Beloved Community of today look like?  
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- What is your individual and specific action to create the Beloved Community you imagined together?  
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- What is your communal and specific action to create the Beloved Community you imagined together?

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- Who must you involve in your pursuit to create this Beloved Community?

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- What are the barriers? How will you address the obstacles?

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- Who will do this with you? How will you disciple or teach others about how to do the work of building the Beloved Community?

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- How will you hold each other accountable for this work? How will you ensure that it is not forgotten after the series ends?

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### **BUILD: (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Together, let's continue to build the Beloved Community.

Thank you for joining this journey. It has probably been difficult at some point, but you've stuck with it!

When a baptism occurs in our worship, the gathered people are asked to remember their own baptism and reaffirm their baptismal covenant:

- “Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?”
- “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, Injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”
- “Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord...”
- “...in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?”
- “Will you nurture these persons in Christ's holy Church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?”

So, the question for the people of God today is this: Will you live out your baptismal promises to God through building the Beloved Community?

It turns out that building the Beloved Community is not about the blocks after all. It's about the people. It was always and will always be about the people. We don't build for the sake of the blocks. We build the Beloved Community for the sake of building up people!

### **CLOSING (SUGGESTED TIME: 5 MINUTES)**

Let's review and close with prayer.

#### **REMEMBER**

“[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

*Micah 6:8 (NRSVUE)*

Agape love is the Beloved Community in action. The **Cornerstone** helps us recognize and honor the image of God in every person. The **Foundation** calls us all to personal authenticity and respect for all others. We affirm our differences and do not erase differences as we all form the foundation for Beloved Community. The **Keystone** reminds us that caring for others secures the Beloved Community. Radical inclusivity and



hospitality provide the **Capstone** that protects the Beloved Community. Justice is the **Mortar** that holds the Beloved Community together and includes working to eliminate poverty, hunger and hate as well as equitable sharing of resources. The **Roof** not only protects the Beloved Community, but it also offers a perspective from which to see a clearer vision of Beloved Community

Write a prayer together that incorporates the vision of Beloved Community you designed during these lessons. Perhaps incorporate some of the actions the group shared about how to continue to build Beloved Community. Pray the prayer together. Go in peace with justice.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

The King Center – What is the Beloved Community: <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>

GCORR – 25 traits of the Beloved Community: <https://www.r2hub.org/library/25-traits-of-the-beloved-community>

General Commission of Religion and Race of the United Methodist Church (GCORR): [GCORR.org](http://GCORR.org)

The United Methodist Hymnal

The United Methodist Book of Worship

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Rev. Jasmine was inducted into Morehouse College's prestigious Martin Luther King Jr Board of Preachers in 2017. Rev. Jasmine has been named one of the "12+ Preachers that the English-Speaking World Needs Now" by Nevertheless She Preached.

Alongside Atlanta First UMC, Rev. Jasmine's current focus is developing affordable and attainable housing in downtown Atlanta – including barrier-breaking education and social services.



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**Karen Clark Ristine** worked for more than 20 years as newspaper reporter and editor in Oakland, Dallas and San Diego before answering a call to ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church. Rev. Karen takes great joy when her love of words combines with her love of The Word.



## **ABOUT THE MISSOURI ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

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