**LISTEN – Sermon–** *You can listen to the sermon from Pastor Akesa* [***here****.*](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lVP1lNZgPHslUQ9vsXbTIMUixXkPA8cj/view?usp=share_link)

Today we continue our Black History Month observances for this month with our theme of *Seeing and Caring for the Other*. I wanted to hear again the words of this morning’s scripture but especially Isaiah 11 verse 3 which says about our God that “He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.”

These words are very meaningful to me as the words of the prophet Isaiah remind us that God does not judge us and others by what is seen by His eyes. The reminder that sometimes we have reactions to other people based on who they are, what we see, what we hear or have heard and that can include the color of their skin, their ethnicity, someone’s age, another’s gender, or someone’s sexual orientation. Basically, what makes others different from you and me; what is referred to as the many “isms” that separate us from the other.

This is not an easy or comfortable topic to discuss but as a community that desires to be conduits of healing and love for the other, I would like to invite your engagement with me in those areas that are uncomfortable. Then I would ask that you be in prayerful discernment through this journey of awareness this Black History Month to determine if additional work and conversation is needed to help us with those areas where we are uncomfortable. This because in order for us to meet the call for us as heard from John

13:34 of Jesus’ new commandment that he calls us to carry out that says, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Jesus is not asking us, but reminding us of our responsibility that we are called to love one another—the clarifying word before those words is “must” “….you must love one another.”

Not just those people that we know, not just those people that act like us, look like us, but true to these words, simply “one another.” The call to share love with all. However, for various reasons, we may have reservations about other people perhaps based on personal experience with someone, news reports about others, or preconceived thoughts or generalizations about a group of people.

I am very grateful to Steve Taddei who spoke to us last week about the life of two men with different backgrounds and experiences and how one’s life was forever changed because the other decided to be radical against what was the norm in society and stand up for someone else who was different. Next week we have another special guest speaker honoring Black History Month in Micheal Pope, a wonderful human who is also our Annual Conference Lay Leader and the CEO of Alzheimer’s Services of the East Bay. In addition, following our worship service next Sunday [2/19/23], we will be having an informational conversation about the Bethlehem district village of Wadi Foquin and learn of the challenges and injustices they have been experiencing. The timing is not by coincidence when we are talking about being open to educating ourselves more about the differences in others in response to the reminder that Jesus calls us to love one another as Jesus loves you, and you, and me.

For two Sundays I will be speaking to you about the words and phrases we use as we continue the work of God in understanding and where needed, advancing racial justice.

This because as “humanity’s understanding and discussion of the concepts of race, racism, and antiracism have evolved over generations, so have the words and phrases we use.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The UMC’s General Commission on Religion and Race continue to do great work in providing churches with information to help with the work of anti-racism and have offered a series that is called the “What Is” Series which is what I will be drawing from to explore and engage in. Today, I wanted to explore the meaning of a term we hear used often called

“Beloved Community.”

We hear the word community used in so many ways to describe how and where people feel community or want to be in community. We have different experiences or ideas when we hear about online community, business community, community at concerts, sports games, festivals, support group, our neighborhoods, here in a church community. The list can be long and different for each of us. How people feel about community is different for everyone.

The term “beloved community” was first developed by philosopher and theologian Josiah Royce but later made popular by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. because for him it meant much more than blacks and whites having equal access to seats on the bus; it was about reconciliation and deliverance and restoration. Dr. King believed that in the beloved community, all forms of discrimination, bigotry, and dehumanization were replaced by a more inclusive and interconnected life that would result in people living in non-violent harmony with one another. Dr. King felt that it was in this type of love that can change opposers into friends. For Dr. King, the beloved community was where everyone’s physical and spiritual needs were met and true and genuine connection with each other was achieved; what it means to experience the kingdom of God here on earth.

The beloved community that Dr. King envisioned is all inclusive; where all are welcome and included and no one was left out. In other words, if it is a beloved community, there is a place for everyone. And not just making a place but being intentional to want to know the other more or taking radical intentional steps to make a place for the other before they get here. This is also meant that the differences of the members of the beloved community have to be accepted, supported, and embraced especially if we feel they are different than us—that’s a hard one because we like to be in our comfort zone and with whom we are comfortable.

Dr. King was advocating that we all have to work for justice and that justice was not just for ourselves; justice is not just for our friends and loved ones, but that we would have to

work for justice for every member of the beloved community—beyond those of us gathered for Sunday mornings. The other that is referenced in this morning’s scripture from John13:34 about Jesus’ new commandment that we “love one another.” To Dr. King, a world where are all connected or interconnected is the way we could create or move towards empathy for the other and will help solve our differences by building the beloved community. In other words, pursuing the beloved community by loving one another by doing the intentional work to understand how we ourselves engage with others who are different in addition to learning about the other. This means learning about their backgrounds, culture, and not just letting our initial thoughts or reactions become our conclusions about the other. To Dr. King, God’s agape love was the foundation of a beloved community. Dr. King was certain that agape love is the "overflowing love, which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless, and creative…It is the love of God operating in the human heart".[[2]](#footnote-2)

Let me give you an example of beloved community and an example when it was not a beloved community. Recently Fred and I met with someone who we partner with in a supportive role. Long story short, there were situations that needed attention and when the conversation started, I realized immediately Fred had the best approach of inviting this person to tell us how things have been going instead of saying it has been brought to our attention that X, Y & Z have been going on. What I experienced was that clearly there was awareness of this other person’s life and impact of this person’s cultural context and because respect for the other had been established, this person knew they were in a safe place because of that established trust. This person knew that Fred cares deeply for this person’s wellbeing and not because this person can or is expected to do anything for Fred—it was and is because of love for the other in need. While we know there are services for this type of situation, in this case this person and family needed help to get to those services. It was a humbling moment of realizing that while situations may not be ideal and comfortable, it is love for the other that inspires action even when it is not easy and at times frustrating.

The other example is when beloved community was not evident. I remember one day within the first couple of months after we have moved into our home that we live in now. I was turning onto our street and noticed that a police car was behind me. The police car followed along the few turns it took me to get to our new home and I thought this is great, our street is monitored. However, when I pulled over to back down into our driveway, the police car passed me. I soon realized the police car drove past me, turned around and came back again and this time slowed down long enough to look at me driving down our driveway until the garage door opened. I found that very strange and not welcoming as if I was being checked out if I really belonged there—truly that did not feel good.

Fast forward to the start of the pandemic. We made it a point to visit our neighbors and leave them notes checking on them along with either a small plant or flowers. We walked the block and knocked on doors to share changes the city was making that would impact our street, asked for signatures for the needed petition to block these changes, and participated in planning meetings to speak against a plan that would not work for us and praise the Lord we stopped the action that was being considered. In meeting neighbors, we now have worked to build relationships that we can trust to look out for each other and care for the other.

We are going to be starting the season of Lent by the end of this month and we will be studying the Gospel of Luke through Pastor Adam Hamilton’s book that focuses on Jesus’ concerns as told in Luke for the outsiders, outcasts and outlaws. These conversations about seeing and caring for the other is bringing awareness of each other and how we can make room for those that are not part of this community. I ask that you please be in prayer for understanding and clarity about how we can be radical and intentional about growing as a beloved community who desires to be conduits of healing in so many ways, including from the impacts of separating ourselves because of differences from and with others. Amen.

1. <https://www.r2hub.org/what-is-series> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*. HarperOne, 1991, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)