



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries

FACING RACISM:

A Vision of the Intercultural Community

Antiracism Study Guides



Week 2. Envisioning a New Way of Life Together

Introduction

As we strive to create a world that more closely reflects God's love of justice and diversity, it can be helpful to have a shared image to evoke our common hope. Two such images are the Beloved Community and the New Creation.

Beloved Community

Read: 1 John 4:7-8
see also Ephesians 2:19

Many verses in the Bible speak about the importance of community building. The 1999 policy statement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is entitled *Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community*. But what exactly does the term "Beloved Community" mean, and where does it come from? The phrase "Beloved Community" was first coined by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce. However, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who popularized the term during the Civil Rights Movement. For Dr. King, agape love--the type of love revealed in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross--is at the core of the Beloved Community. It is a love directed towards the neighbor (1 Corinthians 10:24), which "does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess" (Washington 2003, 19). It is a vision of community where "Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood" (The King Center 2014). In the same vein, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s policy statement affirms the vision of the Beloved Community by claiming that "every person's right to be free, to be treated as persons not things, and to be valued as full members of the human community are gifts from God... All persons are mutually linked and meant to live and grow in relationship with each other as we share a common destiny" ("Facing Racism" 1999, 3).

Discussion Questions:

1. Is the term "beloved community" familiar to you? If so, who taught you this phrase?
2. What is the closest experience of community you have had to this vision? What made that community possible? Was it a diverse group? Why or why not?
3. How might our church community move one small step closer to beloved community?

New Creation

Read Isaiah 65:17-25

Another way to imagine a new way of life together is to envision the New Creation, also called the Kingdom of God. Letty Russell, a 20th century Presbyterian theologian, begins with an eschatological (end of time) vision of what God intends for the fulfillment of creation. We see something of what God intends for us in the biblical accounts of God's love for us. Looking back to what God has done, particularly in Jesus, we see what the future ought to look like. This "eschatological future" of the New Creation is "the goal or purpose of life that is prefigured in the coming of Christ and opened up by the promise and actions of God" (Russell 1979, 164). This vision of the New Creation gives us guidance and courage to act for justice here and now, as we are called to live towards and anticipate the future God intends for us. Russell claims we must "begin from the point of view of New Creation and of what God intends us to become in Jesus Christ" (1979, 15). Beginning with the future, as we know it in the memory of God's love for us, we can act with justice and hospitality now.

These two images, Beloved Community and New Creation, give shape to our hope for more faithful life together. While they are quite similar in envisioning right relationships, they also have some differences. Although the image of the beloved community has always been a vision for the future, for many it is also associated with the past, that is, with the Civil Rights Movement. This can be an empowering association or a painful reminder of the limitations of our progress. Similarly, the image of New Creation can seem either impersonal or prophetically inclusive of environmental concerns. These images are not definitions of the future we seek, but rather gestures towards the promises of God.

Discussion Questions:

1. What associations or feelings does "New Creation" evoke for you?
2. How might issues of ecology be related to issues of racism?
3. How could our church community move a bit closer to New Creation?

Resources

Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Community. 211th General Assembly (1999) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (insert Minutes reference)
The King Center, "The King Philosophy: The Beloved Community," 2014, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#_sub4> (20 August 2015).

King, Jr., Martin Luther. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington. New York: HarperOne, 2003.

Russell, Letty M. *The Future of Partnership*, [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1979].