

Oh, Beloved Community, return to us. Help us to find the righteous path we have forsaken so we may again lie down in your green pastures, beside your still waters that restore our soul. Oh, Beloved Community, at your table we were comforted. We feared no evil. Our cup overflowed. In your dwelling goodness and mercy followed us in all our days. Oh, Beloved Community, return to us.

Sometimes it feels as if we are lost; that we've lost our way. That we are truly exiled from the Garden – east of Eden. Hopefully the events of the summer have finally opened our eyes to the fact that there is much about our community which is not Beloved - that our pastures are not green, our waters not still; and for far too many, there is no comfort, goodness or mercy.

This summer I took an online philosophy course – philosophy of the western tradition from Descartes to Derrida. Although one of the conclusions drawn from the course is that we actually don't really have any way truly knowing anything; (that's problematic) there was one other thing, one other idea presented to me that was shocking. The idea is this:

The 18th century Enlightenment invented the idea of progress.....Throughout history, human civilizations and tribal local societies have not generally accepted the idea that the future is going to be better than the present or the past. They would have recoiled at the idea. The future is to both repeat the present and both are supposed to repeat the past. For most human cultures, the great age, the golden age, was the age when our ancestors behind us spoke directly to the gods, or where our heroic ancestors roamed the earth. The patterns of our ancestors made us who we are (Lawrence Cahoon, *The Great Courses: The Modern Intellectual Tradition*, Lecture 6)."

Progress is a modern "invention?" I had a hard time imagining that. The instructor acknowledged my, and perhaps your disbelief, by saying that today the idea of progress is second nature to us, it is "imbibed in our mother's milk (Ibid)."

In ancient communities, the community itself was sacred. It wasn't so much about the individual. It was about "the people." And although ancient communities were not perfect, (and Beloved Community is not about perfection), you belonged; you were a valued part of that community – the clan, the tribe, the band, the circle. Beloved Community is really about radical belonging.

Progress has no doubt been beneficial to us in many ways: germ theory, advances in medicine, public sewage, electric guitars, ice cream. Enlightenment's progress brought about the age of modernity and with it a turn to the subject: an enlightened, modern idea of selfhood, individual liberty, personal freedom. These sound like good things...and they can be good things.

Yet has modernity with its enlightened “invention” of progress and its turn to the self come at a price? Has this led us closer to, or perhaps further from, Beloved Community? Friedrich Nietzsche thought that “modernity is the most life-denying and self-alienating approach to life possible (Ibid).” Has our blind faith in the progress of modernity and the glorification of the self led to the oppression of those not “ourselves?” Has this led to us having profound feelings of isolation and disconnection; not only from others but also from ourselves; to the extent that we often don’t feel comfortable even in our own skin?

Robber Chih, in our time for all ages story this morning, confronts the wise Confucius with this. “Your ways of improvement and progress have taken us further from ourselves. We are now caught up in greed, warfare as a result of your ‘wisdom.’ You’ve created this camp (The Book of Chuang Tzu).”

The unfortunate events of the summer have clearly, tragically shown us the camps we’ve created. And just who is this “we”? Well...and it’s hard to get around this... if we aren’t the target of a particular form of oppression, then we are responsible for it. If we aren’t actively resisting, deconstructing what we’ve created, then we are giving it the green light; we are complicit in its continued creation. There is no getting around it: if we believe in an interdependent cosmos then we are all responsible.

If modernity seems to be taking us further from Beloved Community, an ideal that our ancestors embodied more fully, does this mean we have to go back to being hunters and gatherers? Well, barring some type of apocalypse, that’s not going to happen. So, what to do?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a friend to, and a critic of many of the enlightenment proponents, believed we must abide by a social contract for the common good at all times; that there should be no such thing as individual, private good but only community good, common good, public good. This might all sound sweet and lovely but for those of us who bear responsibility for what we’ve created, would this require us to change, sacrifice, turn away from the shallow “I” of individualism and privilege and act for the common good of all; for larger more magnanimous purposes?

In recent months, I’ve been personally inspired with ideas to serve the common good by UUMAN’s Earth Ministry team. They have been hosting viewings of some very thoughtful films that, looking through an ecological lens, are highly critical of the modern world we’re creating. Yet rather than simply being critical, ideas for change, steps that we ourselves can take, steps that other have taken, are being offered.

The 2015 film “Tomorrow” was particularly inspiring. Focusing on several aspects of life which one might conclude are under threat or broken, the film provides case studies, windows through which hope through change can be seen.

One case study focused on a town in England that was organically growing its own food. In seemingly every patch of public space in town food was being grown. In twenty square feet of land outside police headquarters, you could pick yourself some berries. Food was simply growing everywhere. Food became visible; known, immediate, tactile; not an invisible item of consumption that appears magically from the agri-industrial complex.

Another case study focused on the economy. A town developed and issued their own discounted currency that could only be used in the town. This encouraged spending at locally owned businesses and discouraged spending that extracted wealth from the town to benefit non-local businesses.

A town in India radically re-envisioned their democracy in such a way that made it easy for all citizens to participate. Participation became an easy, default option of sorts. This resulted in the breaking of caste barriers and a new way of loving one's neighbors and building community.

But what struck me most of all in the film, more than any one thing, was that everything that was done, in all the case studies, was done locally – in one's own local community. There was no talk of grand, nationwide policy initiatives, no engagement with national politicians, etc. No. Everything was small and local. People were looking at themselves in the mirror, and taking it upon themselves to make their community better; and they did so by turning away from themselves, that shallow "i" of individualism, and towards the common good of all. They are on the path of returning to Beloved Community.

Oh, Beloved Community, return to us. Help us to find the righteous path we have forsaken so we may again lie down in your green pastures, beside your still waters that restore our soul. At your table we will once again be comforted. We will fear no evil. Our cup will once again overflow and in your dwelling goodness and mercy will follow us in all our days; and may we forever dwell in you. Amen.