

**Theodore Parker Church**  
**Mining the Small Victories**  
**February 7, 2021**

Rose reminded me that the Celtic celebration of Imbolc (the halfway point between the winter solstice and spring equinox) is February 1<sup>st</sup> this year — a small victory, perhaps, marking the forward movement into the generative season of spring. It begs the question: Are small victories enough?

**INTROIT** Everybody's Got a Right to Live - Poor People's Campaign

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGKH9tDt2hw>

**OPENING WORDS**      **A Place of Belonging and Caring**      by [Kimberlee Anne Tomczak Carlson](#)

It is not by chance that you arrived here today.  
You have been looking for something larger than yourself.  
Inside of you there is a yearning, a calling, a hope for more,  
A desire for a place of belonging and caring.  
Through your struggles, someone nurtured you into being,  
Instilling a belief in a shared purpose, a common yet precious resource  
That belongs to all of us when we share.  
And so, you began seeking a beloved community:  
A people that does not put fences around love.  
A community that holds its arms open to possibilities of love.  
A heart-home to nourish your soul and share your gifts.  
Welcome home; welcome to worship.

**Story for All Ages**      Rose Gallogly, Coordinator of Religious Exploration

This morning we're exploring the importance of small victories, of noticing and celebrating each step that takes us closer to the world we dream of, perhaps closer to the beloved community. In a moment I'll be sharing a story about how everything starts with a single step, one small action in the right direction.

It's also made me think: when have I experienced a small victory that I knew built towards the world I wish to see? We know, in theory, that all things happen one step at a time, that it takes all of us to build toward change... but in our daily lives it's often so hard to feel like that's true. Yes, I can celebrate actions I've taken towards a more just world, but webs of connection and change are so complicated — how could I ever know if my one phone call or conversation or direct action really did help pass the piece of legislation, or stop the deportation, or cancel the pipeline? How could we ever really know?

But then, I start to think not only about what each of those small actions might be doing in the world around me — surely they are part of a web of connection that grows stronger the more it is built on — but also about what each of those small actions has done to *me*. What changes in me when I choose to trust the power of each of my small actions? How might that trust help me to expand, strengthen my sense that I am a part of an interconnected web, that in fact I'm inseparable from it?

In that spirit, I'd like to share this morning's story, I Am One.

I Am One: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLGdhvXuSUw> (importance of small actions)

**READING** - Howard Zinn, from "The Optimism of Uncertainty"  
(in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*)

Don't look for a moment of total triumph. See engagement as an ongoing struggle, with victories and defeats, but in the long run slow progress. So you need patience and persistence. Understand that even when you don't "win," there is fun and fulfillment in the fact that you have been involved, with other good people, in something worthwhile . . . .

We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.

**MEDITATION/PRAYER** A collegial conversation.

"I'm not quite sure I understand," she said, in a quiet, gentle voice, "what spiritual practice really is. I guess I should. I'm a minister, after all! But the rules I imagine confuse me: every day, or at a particular time every day, the same thing, for a specific amount of time. I find myself, instead, wanting to do something different every day. And I keep asking myself, would that count?"

A few weeks later, when we met again, she said: "I felt badly that I hadn't figured it out last time. It felt like I should have, so I thought about it some more. Was there something I needed? Was there some form or activity that would help me form a practice? I thought about music, knowing how important it is in my life."

That's it, she decided. Every day, she would plan to begin with music. She conquered her shame, put down the "should" and found herself looking forward to the practice. It felt like a small victory.

Of course, even small victories can be elusive. The first morning didn't go quite as planned. She got up on time. She was prepared with all the required technology. "You know, I hate technology," she said . . . "I'm not very good at it and especially now, when we are so reliant on it. . . . I hate it."

She set the computer; she plugged in her earbuds; she turned on the song . . . but there was no sound. She decided her earbuds must be broken. So much for small victory, she thought, and with ambivalence she went hunting for another pair . . . she found another pair, but with only one side working, still that was better than nothing, she decided. Yes, maybe a small victory, after all.

And, tomorrow. Tomorrow would be better.

Spirit of life, this is our prayer. That we might live into this moment – right here, right now – as it comes to us. Every moment is the possibility of a small victory, a chance to practice, that we might attend to the gift of it for ourselves and not ourselves alone. Help us to know that when we attend to today, tomorrow will be better – whatever it brings, as we will be more whole, more healed, more willing.

Help us to see, and feel each victory, no matter the size.. It is all practice.

**HOMILY                    Mining the Small Victories    the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

So, February! We are exactly six weeks less one day away from the first day of spring!!

And, we begin a month of focus on Beloved Community - what has become a common phrase in our spiritual arena, and even our progressive political realm. We certainly reference it frequently in Unitarian Universalist environments, though it may not, in fact - even among us - be a commonly understood phrase. What does it mean, exactly, this idea of Beloved Community and where did the idea begin? We have the general sense, right? Integration, justice and opportunity for all. I'm guessing Martin Luther King, Jr. likely made it familiar to most of us - the aspiration he offered that related to his dream of a world where our children are judged not by the color of their skin but the content of their character; and, not only that. His Beloved Community rested on equality of opportunity and access to economic well-being; on social justice and inclusion for all.

But the idea did not begin with King. It filtered down, as ideas do, from 19th century American theologian and philosopher, Josiah Royce (who is credited with coining it) through Howard Thurman, and others. It's important to have a sense of how ideas get started, so I want to back up and review this just a little bit.

Royce was a big 19th century (to early twentieth century) thinker in this country - a theologian and philosopher, and teacher - who made original contributions in ethics, the philosophy of community, the philosophy of religion and logic. This was a rich time of ideas and redefining, coming at the end of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution - the relationships between the individual and the collective all being re-assessed and reconsidered. Royce insisted, *"My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community."* (And, he observed) that, besides the actual communities we experience on a daily basis, there was also an ideal "beloved community"

made up of all those who would be dedicated fully to the cause of loyalty, truth and reality itself.  
(<https://www.rejoicingspirits.org/together-we-are-beloved-community>)

He suggested that, “Individuals remain individuals, but in forming a community they attain to a kind of second-order life that extends beyond any of their individual lives,” something he also referred to as “communities of grace.” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/royce/#Loy>)

Even in my fairly surface-level research, we see the thread that carries Royce’s ideas about Beloved Community forward to King primarily through the work of another theologian, philosopher and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, familiar to us - of course - in our Christmas reading about The Work of Christmas that begins when the holiday ends: to heal the sick, to feed the hungry, etc. Thurman had been a classmate of Martin Luther King, Sr. at the historically black Morehouse College. He spent some significant time in San Francisco where he co-founded, along with a white preacher named Alfred Fisk, the first major interracial, interdenominational church in the United States called The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. He influenced MLK, Jr., during his tenure as Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, and through his prolific writing, and especially with the idea of non-violence that he had learned through meeting Gandhi in India.

Each of these three thinkers (Royce, Thurman and King) had a construct of Beloved Community that was slightly distinct from the other, but shared the idea that its attainment includes an aspect greater than ourselves.

“Royce, Thurman, and King were all committed to building a community built on love. . . .

. . . (for all three), though each expressed it in his own way, the notion of the beloved community signaled a loyal commitment to radical . . . unconditional love, social justice, and an acknowledgement of the inviolable dignity of persons.”

(<https://amityjournal.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2017/10/Jensen-and-King-2017.pdf>)

So here we are wondering what it means for us - this lofty concept - and how the idea intersects with the idea of small victories. We wonder if any of the three thought Beloved Community was really possible? Or was it only an aspiration? And, if possible, how long would it take?

I saw this line yesterday: The day you plant the seed is not the day you eat the fruit.

I’m sure there are many who feel, and rightfully so, that the seed of Beloved Community has been planted over and over in the last one hundred years and more. How long before the fruit is ready for picking?

I think that's a clue, and the answer is: as long as it takes. Whether we believe we will live long enough to ever witness the reality of beloved community has little to do with our willingness to believe in its ideals, or to work to plant more seeds that might one day bear its fruit, for us, or for those in front of us.

And it's the small victories that remind us it's worth the effort. Black History Month is designed to remind us of the small victories of the past, right?

I wonder if you've noticed an Instagram reminder: *Ya'll know you can celebrate black people everyday, right? Black History 365. Small victories, over and over.*

So, I mentioned the story of my colleague pursuing a spiritual practice during our meditation time today because I want to make the connection between the quality of our attention to creating beloved community (in the many ways we engage with justice concerns) with the quality of attention we pay to spiritual practice. Our practices - whatever they are, however built into our routines or only occasional - are the reminders of who we are and how we want to be in the world. And the opportunity to practice, that is to be reminded and attentive to that, is available all the time, right? The hour of meditation or our daily prayers, or wandering through woods and by rivers, or connecting to our bodies through yoga or swimming, or in listening to music, are the ways we remember to connect with that which is larger than ourselves . . . just like our work on behalf of justice.

Everything we do contributes to our knowing that everything is holy - every ritual, every accidental wake-up call, every effort to get out of the circle that is ourselves alone . . . those are all the small victories, back to back, that move us forward toward that seemingly elusive goal, that ripening fruit.

This tradition does not prescribe the how. It only points us in the right direction. Our theology of liberation gives us the freedom to find our own small victories and our community victories by helping us to remember how much better off we are ALL together than on our own.

And when we're practicing that - in our hearts and in our actions - tomorrow will be a better day, for all of us. That is definitely a victory to celebrate.

## **CLOSING HYMN 1058**

## **Be Ours a Religion**

Be ours a religion  
Which like sunshine goes everywhere,  
It's temple all space,  
Its shrine the good heart,  
Its creed all truth,  
Its ritual works of love.

## **BENEDICTION**

We receive fragments of holiness,  
glimpses of eternity,  
brief moments of insight.  
Let us gather them up  
for the precious gifts that they are and,  
renewed by their grace,  
move boldly into the unknown.

- Sara Moores Campbell

## **POSTLUDE Sibelius "Piece enfantine"**

## **CANDLES**