

The Beatitudes – Matthew 5: 10-12, 9

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of God.*

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you
and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

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Standing For Reason and Tolerance

During these two months of January and February, we've been focused on building "the beloved community" – the phrase used by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to describe a community built on the conviction that we are all children of God – each of us, across all barriers.

So we're gathering often, starting off the year with a shared New Year's Evensong service, dinner and concert; a book group that met twice in January; 46 of us who last Sunday night walked down to the Parish House for soup and salad after the Choir's Evening concert.

Today we'll share tours together, next week we'll have lunch and learn about the Veterans Center located one block from here, and in two weeks, we are all invited to the retreat at Glastonbury Abbey.

Building the Beloved Community -- within these walls, despite painful differences we've had in the past; and building the community out beyond our walls, greeting newcomers, and discerning how we are called to serve our wider City of Boston.

Today we focus on another aspect of Building Beloved Community – this time across national boundaries - as we honor our ties to the Unitarians who in the 1500s founded the first Unitarian Church in Kolozsvár, Transylvania, now in the country of Romania. Denton and Peter will give you the more complete history right after our service.

Let me focus now on the experience our sisters and brothers in the Unitarian Transylvanian Church have had *living* the Beatitudes I just quoted – being reviled and persecuted because they were Unitarians in that land, a religious minority who has fared poorly most of past several centuries.

That's the history of our forebears in Transylvania. In the 1500s, the world was in religious tumult, the powerful Christian Church was critiqued from within, Roman

Catholics and the protestors (the Protestants) severed. Our forebears in Transylvania argued for a Christianity that included these central features: 1) use of our human reason to discern; and 2) tolerance of different understandings of the truth.

Human reason and tolerance had a central place in Christianity, they asserted. Transylvanian minister Francis David forcefully argued this, and for a brief time, these twin principles – human reason and religious tolerance – held sway in that land, sandwiched between the Ottoman Empire of Islam, the Christian Orthodox of Greece and Russia to the East, and the European Catholics and Protestants to the West.

Perhaps because the Transylvanians lived in that fulcrum, perhaps because they had met men and women with different beliefs, perhaps because they had seen the horror of warfare played out again and again on their soil, there in the crossroads between competing interests, when the people of that land heard a message about using our human reason, and about tolerance for different religious views, they signed on!

You see, when one has had exposure to people and ideas unlike your own, when people come to believe that we are all beloved of God, all honored by God, then we are more willing to trust each other to think for ourselves.

The beloved community is founded on respect for individuals; we dignify each other. I ask you to listen to me. But I also assume that I may have something to learn from you, so I hear your thoughts, too.

Human reason and tolerance. Grounding principles of the Christian Unitarianism of Transylvania.

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We can't trace a direct path from these ideas in the 1500s to those of our minister James Freeman in the 1700s; bright and thinking people can independently reach similar conclusions in different parts of the globe, of course.

But we know that these radical ideas traveled between Transylvania and Poland, and between Poland and England, and between England and America. And that today we still hold them dear, in this congregation: we, too are committed to human reason and tolerance within Christianity.

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Pete Seeger died this week, a man who also stood for years in support of causes he deemed just, but which were hardly popular at their start. He stood with laborers during the depression, against McCarthyism in the 50s, for civil rights and against

the Viet Nam War in the 60s, and for a cleaner environment, along his beloved Hudson River, in the 80s and beyond.

Seeger is held in esteem by many now, but for years he suffered financially and was banned from many venues because of his views. He was reviled and picketed by the John Birch Society as anti-American, prosecuted criminally by the FBI for his refusal to name names to McCarthy, banned from television for decades, and his performance group, the Weavers, broke up under the pressure.

How many of us remember the way Pete Seeger suffered? Or is it easier to just remember his songs, and hum along, "Goodnight Irene...."

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But if we were to forget Seeger's travails, or those of the Transylvanian Unitarians, we wouldn't be doing our job. Because those who are reviled are nonetheless blessed by God – that odd and incongruous notion – when *we* become agents of God's blessing to those who suffer.

Here at King's Chapel we stand for tolerance and human reason, too. But our stance did not require the anguish that the Transylvanians experienced. Our Unitarian leaders in this place were not martyred for their beliefs. Our churches were not banned. We didn't have to meet secretly in homes. Our building – this beautiful building that we treasure, as Transylvanians have treasured theirs – was not taken by a government opposed to us. Our seminaries were not limited to only two new ministers per year - *nationally* – as happened in Transylvania, even recently.

And most of us, unlike Pete Seeger, have not lost lucrative contracts because we stood with low wage workers, protested for peace, demanded equal treatment across races, or insisted that polluters clean the PCBs from our river.

How are these who've come before us been "blessed," despite being reviled and persecuted?

They are blessed, *if* we here at King's Chapel are God's hands of blessing helping Transylvanians rebuild after the ravages of World Wars and Communism's oppressions.

They and leaders like Pete Seeger are blessed, *if* we honor their actions, and commit to stand as firmly for justice and tolerance and the power of human reason in a beloved religious community that continues on, and thrives.

They are blessed, when they know that they do not stand alone, and we stand by their side.

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Two last notes. First, I've enshrined the word "tolerance" today. But we know that tolerance can be translated "live and let live," a comfortable notion that lets us duck tough issues, that says "anything goes."

Tolerance misconstrued becomes apathy, a total lack of conviction. There *are* times we must be intolerant: intolerant of intolerance. We must stand against intolerant racism, for example, refusing to countenance its vicious outcomes. A beloved community does not tolerate racism.

Second, though we may be convinced that we are squarely on the side of angels, seeking justice is not a warrant for us to persecute and revile others. We can be intolerant of their positions; we may strongly disagree and refuse to accept their views, but in the beloved community, we still treat even our enemies with kindness and respect.

It is not easy – all these grays in a world we'd prefer were black and white.

That's why we read the Beatitudes in full – we are blessed when we do God's work, though we may be persecuted and reviled, but we are also blessed when we are peacemakers. *How* we do God's work matters.

The prophet Micah said it best: "What does the Lord require of us, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

When we do justice, we act always with kindness, and walk humbly with our God: because God is God, and we are not, and others may have something to teach us.

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So come to our shared communion meal knowing this: We are heirs to a profound legacy, of many who came before us to build this beloved community, to forge a country where different views are tolerated, and justice is sought; heirs to the many who opened doors so that we might have the *gift* of using our minds and reason; heirs to those who gave us a space in which to worship freely, here in King's Chapel, where everyone – regardless of belief or doubt – is invited to join the circle and partake of communion, in beloved community.

Stay for a few minutes after the service to learn more about this legacy, so that we continue it, too. and continuing it, discover how blessed we are.

For I wonder: When have we here at King's Chapel bravely stood, against the odds, in favor of a position that made us reviled?

When will we?

Oh I wonder how God may call us next, this beloved community.