

February's theme is "Beloved Community," and I first want to reflect on how well our virtual annual meeting went. The voting process worked beautifully (even though there were some adjustments), and we passed the 8th principle, committing our congregation to creating a beloved community by abolishing racism and dismantling white supremacy and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions. We are in the enviable position, dear board members, to help our congregation find ways to live out this principle within our congregation and in the community. It is a very special opportunity. Now that we can zoom anywhere in the world, I regularly meet with a group based in Harlem, and a 90 year old African American woman shared with me that her primary practice is to say to every person (in her mind) "I love you," and see what kind of behavior might flow from that. Indeed, she's practicing beloved community.

Last month, we had a lively virtual conversation with Jimma McWilson and local educational and NAACP leadership about ways of addressing the failures of our public school system in Youngstown, as well as other cities like Toledo. Gary Davenport, Lisbet White, and Sarah Lowry were also on the call, and there were some connections made within our state. One of the chapter presidents made a point of showing pictures of the founders of the NAACP, and indeed one of those founders was a Unitarian minister, John Haynes Holmes, from Community Church in New York City. It gave me confidence that the commitments of today are rooted in a tradition.

We recently met with parents in our congregation about their hope for religious education. John Shartle and Lisbet White were also present, and there was great energy and enthusiasm about having a program as well as multigenerational activities. I appreciated the parents who spoke forthright that it would be a great gift if there was a program for their children, where they were not expected to teach unless it was planned for them to do ahead of time. Parents enjoy attending worship, and there was a shared sentiment that they want their children to have an ethical and moral foundation coupled with a tolerance for different traditions and perspectives. We can definitely provide this, but I will need your assistance, and we will need the assistance of the congregation for this effort to be fruitful. I think we can do it, and I can really see once the church opens up in person, we would be a church to welcome families and offer support for children growing up with our 8 principles.

I've heard from some of you that you have already received a dose of the Covid-19 vaccine (maybe both by now). So far I haven't heard of any major side effects or symptoms in our community, beyond a numb/sensitive arm that does resolve itself eventually. I heard that since I'm a chaplain of the Youngstown Police Department, that I qualify as essential. So far I've not been able to get an appointment with the health department, and apparently I'm not alone. For those who struggle navigating bureaucracy (that includes many) it is difficult to navigate the system and get the vaccine even if they qualify. I and fellow clergy are hosting a meeting about this and general education about the Covid-19 vaccine in March, and allowing a Q & A. Understandably given our country's history with the eugenics movement and unequal treatment of minorities in our healthcare system, many in our community are fearful/skeptical about getting the vaccine. So hopefully the meeting will allow us to hash that out, as well as engage with trusted leaders in the community and health care officials who have earned trust who can offer feedback. This will be Tuesday March 9th at 9:30 am on our zoom channel.

In closing I want to say that I'm very excited and grateful to work with such a motivated and talented board this year. Our retreat really showed me we are ready to hit the ground running, and that together we can further the mission of this church. We have a lot of exciting things to cover tomorrow, and I'm looking forward to our meeting.