

Lent 1: Becoming the Beloved

The civil rights movement in the United States that Dr. King led was a movement that began in the Church. It was the biblical imperatives lived by people of faith that gave the movement its foundation, fire and perseverance to not turn back. Today our work is not done. This Lent you are invited to reflect on how you embody the Beloved Community and how you are incarnating God's *agape* love in your life and in your community of faith in meaningful and steadfast ways to help a challenged world.

The core value of the quest for Dr. King's Beloved Community was *agape* love. Dr. King distinguished between three kinds of love: *eros*, "a sort of aesthetic or romantic love"; *philia*, "affection between friends" and *agape*, which he described as "understanding, redeeming goodwill for all," an "overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative"... "the love of God operating in the human heart." He said that "*Agape* does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people... It begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both... *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community" (King's 1959 Sermon on Gandhi).

The Collect

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Read the Scripture together: *Mark 1:9-15*

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Reflection: In this Gospel text we hear after Jesus is baptized, immediately, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He would be sustained for this wilderness journey by his knowledge of his belovedness. He was baptized to be God's Beloved: embodying love by being God's love in the world. Immediately, this belovedness was called upon as both Jesus and John encountered resistance to the truth that they embodied. They did not shrink away from the truth, but continued to live and preach it, and suffered the consequences. What does it mean for us? Like all the spiritual leaders that have gone before, what they knew was the Beloved walked with them. Love led them. Here we can take the first steps and most difficult steps toward becoming a community that reflects God's dream.

Make it Real:

Gather in groups, ideally of no more than eight people. Share *Conversation Tips* from the welcome letter.

Now invite people to pause and recall a particular time and place when you felt beloved of God. A time you knew God's love for you. What was this like?

Next, recall a particular time and place when you have not felt God's love. When do you most notice this love feeling elusive?

Share your experience with a partner. Then reflect in the small group. What did it feel like to share about being beloved? Disconnected from God's love? To hear someone else's story?

What did you learn?

Now as a whole group, using the conversation tips, share stories.

Then recording the elements of agape you discovered and record them together on a large piece of paper.

- What Gospel texts come to mind of experiences of Jesus showing *agape* love? What are the elements that made it *agape* love?
- When did you experience *agape* love *extended to another or group of people* either in your own experience or in a story you read or heard in the news. What elements were present that made it an *agape* love?

- When did you experience *agape* love extended to you by another? What were the elements that made it *agape* love?
- Recall a particular time and place when you experienced being a part of Beloved Community.

WRAPPING UP:

How do you feel as you recall and share these realities?

Where do you see possibilities for incarnating agape love more intentionally in your life? Name them together.

Closing Prayer

You may wish to give thanks for God's grace, wisdom, and abiding love, and for the honesty, courage, and vulnerability people demonstrated. You may return to the promise of forgiveness and new life that we receive in Jesus Christ.