

Building a Beloved Community

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It is a great privilege—a real privilege—to stand here before you in all your verdant strength of youth and to be able to reflect with you on what it means for us to strive to build a beloved community. Last month, Martin Luther King III introduced this series of fora, reflecting upon how we might better become a beloved community.

I need to start with a short introductory thanks to all who have made this possible in difficult circumstances. My time at BYU had a rather unexpected start—and I will come back to that a bit later—but it is appropriate today for me to ask myself two questions: How do I feel? And what is my responsibility in talking to you, my dear friends, in whose debt I will ever be?

How do I feel? A little overwhelmed, I guess, but immensely grateful.

And what is my responsibility? Well, I think I need to start by avoiding any temptation to say things so that you might love or like me! Of course we need to be loved and we need to be understood, but what a dreadfully self-centered way of

viewing this time together that would be. I own up—I want you to like me because a lot of you can run a lot faster than I can at the moment! But my real obligation is that I express my love for you.

In 2 Nephi—a text that has lodged in my heart since I first read it—it is clear that the Book of Mormon’s testimony to the truth of Jesus Christ is not manipulation nor the desire to take power and authority over others but to see and celebrate the glory of God in service and love.

In 2 Nephi, you will remember that Father Lehi tried his hardest to reconcile his feuding sons; he wanted them to see the truth and to appreciate God’s work in each other. He confronted his rebellious sons for accusing Nephi of seeking power and authority over them. He said, “I know that he hath not sought for power nor authority over you, but he hath sought the glory of God, and your own eternal welfare.”¹

I would go so far as to ask the Lord to stay my lips if I veer into manipulation or self-interest rather than words of mission and love.

Andrew Teal, chaplain, fellow, and lecturer in theology at Pembroke College, Oxford University, delivered this forum address on October 26, 2021.

The Lord Loves You

So where do we start? I think, first of all, with the wonder that we are already called into being as a beloved community: we are all beloved *now*. No exceptions. The Lord has called us together because He simply can't take His eyes off us in love. So we need to reflect that wonder. We need to show that whoever somebody is—whatever their color, creed, background, gender, sexual orientation, you name it—the Lord loves them. That is the baseline. We don't have to build that; that is the fact.

Sometimes, in our past, as religious communities of various hues, we have been too quick to speak, too eager to judge, and too slow to listen and communicate the Lord's love. We speak today of a cancel culture, deliberately demonizing and diminishing those with whom we disagree. But some of our different religious communities' approaches to minorities or to powerless people indeed have nurtured this response. So we have to listen and learn and love.

Then we will also find that it is necessary that a beloved community have boundaries, norms, and expectations. No one should be hurt or damaged on the Lord's holy mountain. There cannot be exploitation. We cannot seek to exploit the vulnerable or collude with oppression or unkindness; we must especially safeguard the most vulnerable—those who need our help the most. The Roman Catholic community in the United States, Ireland, France, and the United Kingdom, along with Anglicans in the United Kingdom and worldwide too, has betrayed sacred trusts, much to our shame. So *being* a beloved community is also necessarily *building* a beloved community that is safe—being near enough to be trusted but far enough ahead to be worth following—that listens, and that is accountable.

Contentious Times

That is also countercultural. You will remember that, according to the book of Mosiah, King Benjamin purged contention from the land, inspiring us to "have a mind [not] to injure one another, but to live peaceably,"² pitch our tents toward the holiness of God and His temple, and peaceably use our agency. *Being* a beloved community means

daily beginning again at *building* this beloved community. That is hard: "every day to begin again,"³ as the Rule of Saint Benedict has it. Most of us want certainty—we even look to scripture (particularly those of us from Protestant and Catholic traditions) to offer us a guarantee that we are *in* and they are *out*. And even within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, some people veer away from some of the consequences of being a restored church with a living prophet and don't want to face the difficulty of negotiating change. That's not new, of course; think about the two declarations at the end of the Doctrine and Covenants and how they reflect great trauma and the prophetic task of pastoral care of people facing radical changes concerning plural marriage and race and the priesthood. But change and pastoral support are there. Facing change together is core to this church.

I am sure you have seen some of the stuff on the internet that is aimed against the leadership of the churches, based on longing for a safe ground. There are some very antagonistic American Roman Catholic series of broadcasts that attack Pope Francis and the Catholic bishops. There are also angry Anglican and Methodist broadcasts, because the internet has democratized dissent.

But I am not sure which is most damaging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: antagonistic websites from without, which can often be seen to be the product of damaged or immature people, or websites that seek to defend a perceived traditional Latter-day Saint series of values by attacking BYU or even policies and leadership in the Church. It can feel like a very popular thing to play to a perceived audience and think that we are doing good. But whatever our religious tradition, I think we have a very serious challenge to face.

There may well be freedom of speech in the United States—which, by the way, is very different from how those words would be interpreted in the United Kingdom. There, it is actually quite superficial but altogether more polite. But beware: if we start to become antagonistic and contentious, we must reflect quite seriously on how easy it is to play to our own prejudices. If we become the accuser of our brothers and sisters, even calling

members of this university with whom we disagree “apostate,” then here is a simple test question: Are we being an *advocate* for our brothers and sisters and for the truth, or have we fallen into the role and nature of the *accuser*? Remember that our Lord is always the Advocate; it is our enemy who is ever our accuser.

We live in very contentious times, and so our task to all who come to this beautiful community of BYU, to students and staff and visitors alike, is to say unashamedly, “We see you,” “We love you,” and “We will travel with you together into God’s perfect kingdom.”

At the Chicago airport, I had a flight transfer, and two other passengers sitting there with me asked what I was going to do in Salt Lake City. I tried to explain. Then, in beautifully simple language, one woman looked me in the eye and said, “Well then, you have to listen as hard as you can to learn as much as you can so that you may love completely.”

I think that wonderful woman was not far from the foundations of how we begin to build a beloved community: “We see you,” “We will learn to see ourselves with you,” and “Together we will face the whole host of difficulties rooted in our history and prejudices and our own confusion.”

A Covenant of Solidarity

In January 2020, at the Oxford First Ward of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I spoke in a testimony meeting. While there, I read and signed, in the presence of the congregation, BYU’s contract based on the Honor Code and the Word of Wisdom—the nearest thing to a covenant I could make with this church. But then, of course, COVID came, and this visit to BYU was postponed. I had to decide whether or not I would keep those covenantal promises made in front of God’s people. There was no hesitation. In fact, it was a wonderful antidote to the culture of wanting to be exempt: it is not conformity to rules, but it is me saying yes to the possibility of not reaching out my hand for that which isn’t right. It is saying yes to standing in absolute solidarity with the addict, with people who are taken in and who are financially stretched by the abuse of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, and even

tea. It is possible not to reach out one’s hand to take for oneself but rather to stand mindfully in solidarity with those who cannot easily make those decisions.

I began to see—as an outsider, of course—that the Word of Wisdom is a tremendous resource for sanctification, countering a conformity with destruction and the canceling of others. I am glad that I had the time because of COVID to practice that at home and to begin to understand that before I came here.

Now of course some Christians would describe that sort of covenant and choice as a kind of works-righteousness. John Calvin remolded the words of Saint Augustine and Saint Paul and might have insisted that we can add nothing to what God in Christ has already done for us, and any attempt to do so is the “superfluity of naughtiness.”⁴

From Sojourners to Citizens

I found that this covenant, in fact, has been the unleashing of grace. One early Christian writer, Saint Clement of Rome, in writing to the church in Corinth, used a peculiar word—*paroikousa*—that, I believe, connects with this faithful exercise of agency. The word is often translated “sojourning.”⁵ The First Epistle of Peter speaks of Christian experience as “pass[ing] the time of [our] sojourning.”⁶ In other words, the early Christian community realized that there was a significant difference in the quality of time and space offered in Jesus Christ to that which was on offer in the empire.

Rowan Williams noticed that the words around *paroikousa* (meaning “sojourn,” “exile,” or “stranger”) became the basis of the English word *parish*.⁷ Early Christian understanding of time and space echoes with what others, centuries later, will claim in words such as “this is the place” and “this is our time.”

Sojourning doesn’t just mean waiting for the apocalypse to come; it means claiming this time by the power of, and in the service of, our Lord Jesus Christ. We are not just kicking our heels as if we are waiting to be entertained, waiting with boredom for the exciting apocalypse to come, but rather finding a way of making every moment a means to invite all people into the deepest truths of their lives, into a beloved community, which

takes even our inadequate energies and gifts and builds of them a kingdom with Christ.

In his very small book *The Church and the Kingdom*, Italian Roman Catholic theologian and philosopher Giorgio Agamben offered a story that in this setting you may not find very surprising. He said:

*The initial Christian community, expecting as it did the imminent arrival of the messiah and thus the end of time, found itself confronted with an inexplicable delay. In response to this delay there was a reorientation to stabilize the institutional and juridical organization of the early Church. The consequence of this position is that the Christian community has ceased . . . to sojourn as a foreigner, so as to begin . . . to live as a citizen and thus function like any other worldly institution.*⁸

I love the fact that this thought comes from someone with a scholarly, Catholic background and from a recognition that the gospel is so often traded for *churchianity*. I think of the explosion of delight and joy at the First Vision of Joseph Smith Jr.—even as it unfurls in layers of unexpected opposition, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is always urged to recover that first love. The urgency of mission that I have found in this community, both here in Utah and especially in the England London Mission in the United Kingdom, is that anxious engagement to make every moment a gate through which the Messiah can come and bring us home.

I hope what I am trying to say is that looking together across perceived boundaries that are usually quite watertight can open our understanding and deepen our faith and our humanity. Scholarship need not and must not lead to cynicism; rather, it is an opportunity to become friends and to discuss things like grown-ups!

The Trinity and the Creeds

Let me take you on another historical example from the fourth century, an area I am supposed to know something about. The fourth and fifth centuries wrestled hard to try to find a language of greatest scope to describe the nature of the persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as the nature and the work of Jesus Christ.

There was a notorious priest in the early church who became a point of contention. His name was Arius (ca. 250–336 AD), and, among other things, he was very biblical indeed. He emphasized the singularity of God to the point that only the Father was really God; Jesus was really the first creature, a natural mediator between the created and the eternal. Arius objected very strongly to images of God that depended upon mystery and that asked human arguments to take a back seat—there’s a big irony here of course. The reaction to Arius was, I believe, an attempt to say, “Anything that we can think about God is not anywhere near as significant as what God has shown Himself to be: the Eternal Father, the Only Begotten Son, the Holy Spirit.” That, I believe, is how credal language about the Trinity began. At its best, language about the Trinity was not a *definition* of God—how could it be? But it was an attempt at authentic description.

And yet, in the spiritual civil wars of the fourth century, our universal human instinct to put everything in a box reemerged as an attempt to control even the idea of God. Salvation was construed in what we call the Athanasian creed. The Athanasian creed urges compliance to a series of assertions: “Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.”⁹ How on earth did that happen? From trying to say, “Don’t try to box God in” to making it this prescription? It prescribes salvation by compliance to this idea. Sure, it tries to sustain a sense of mystery, but it does this by saying something, apparently denying it, and then reasserting it, leaving the reader dizzy. It implies to have found an absolute formula for God, which ironically is the very opposite of what the creeds were trying to do!

My experience with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has meant that for me, even some of the most beautiful Eastern Orthodox prayers now make me stop and ponder if they address prayer not to the *persons* of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit but to an *idea* of the Trinity. I am a Nicene Christian, but I am one who doesn’t worship a human idea, however clever or pleasing. I don’t think that the notion of the Holy Trinity is a sort of quadratic equation

that holds together the three persons in a singular divinity. And I have to say something quite controversial now: I do not know of a church that rigorously addresses the *persons* of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit more than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (Ironically, you are more trinitarian than the Trinitarian Church is.) To share this in an academic and interreligious context so that we may understand one another and push further into the beautiful mystery of God has to be our desire. And that is building a beloved community.

You may have heard of other divisions around the creeds: how churches fragmented, arguing whether or not the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son or just the Father alone. The East and the West now have different Nicene creeds. Shared scholarship beyond simply the East and the West of the old churches, beyond Orthodox, Catholic, and Reformed, which includes also the insights of the restored church, will help us all.

I profoundly believe that scholarship can help us reach beyond factionalism and beyond brittle apologetic. What is the basis of this? *Friendship, commitment, trust, and truth.*

True Friendship

So can we look at each other as the Lord looks upon us? He longs for us in love, but He does not leave us where we first begin. True friendship asks all sorts of questions—questions we do not yet know the answers to. I trust and love you, and I want to ask a lifetime of questions as I travel alongside you, with a longing heart, bringing others—beautiful people from my own and other religious communities—along with me so that they can find and share something of the richness, the kindness, and the truthfulness that have overwhelmed me in this place and in this church.

I was sitting in a wonderful house where I live opposite the Marriott Center—pop in and say hi, but don't all come at once!—one sunny fall day, and I was praying and reading section 136 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It made me weep with joy. President Brigham Young—at Winter Quarters, on the west bank of the Missouri River—wrote after the martyrdom of Brother Joseph:

The Word and Will of the Lord concerning the Camp of Israel in their journeyings to the West:

*Let all the people of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and those who journey with them, be organized into companies.*¹⁰

Those six short words—“and those who journey with them”—were like a fountain of truth and trust. I sat knowing that this scripture was another testimony of Jesus Christ in this new world—after all that had happened unexpectedly and crowning as it were the massive kindnesses overwhelming me. Traveling alongside this restored church means being a part of a fluid, happy, and repentant community. I am constantly delighted by the wonder of that invitation, not only to know ourselves as loved (“I am a child of God,”¹¹ as you sing—that’s a dignity that nothing temporal can ever take away) but to continue becoming and building up one another in love, not being afraid to keep on growing.

When I first came over to Utah around four years ago, there was a sense of excitement at President Russell M. Nelson’s insistence that the Church relinquish its shorthand self-description as “Mormon” and rely instead upon what the scriptures of this Church use. First of all, stating “The Church,” *ekklesia*, called out from collusion and convention to grinding monotony into God’s own Being. Then, naming the Lord Jesus Christ, moving away from cultural identity alone, moving to universal and eternal identity—that of belonging to the only name under heaven conveying health and salvation. Then stating that we are in the latter days, not the institutional continuity of chronological time but *kairos*, the option of moving everything to enable all souls to enter the kingdom. And finally, “Saints,” with holiness in our hearts and holiness unto the Lord. Initially I thought, “Why use all those words when the singular word *Mormon* might do?” But now I see just how sloppy it would be and the wisdom of that revelation to President Nelson.

So I have to tell you, my friends, that I think that my life’s direction has been heading here even if I didn’t know it. God is not an autocrat or tyrant, and He invites our collaboration—individual and joint agency—at every turn. There is a real

possibility of greater unity between our churches and between our academies as we are beginning to explore an organic Pembroke College, Oxford–BYU connection, looking for decades of profound collaboration. Not just a series of theological, legal, humanitarian, and practical conferences and events—as good as they all are—or regular visiting scholars; but this is the time, this is the place, because this is *His* time, this is *His* place. I am not proposing another piecemeal reformation but traveling together.

The problem with reformations is that they are human ideas. The shocking power of the revelation to Joseph Smith Jr. is that here was no great German academic but an ordinary man who dared to *ask* God and who had the ears to listen to the answer of the Father and the Son, the boldness to invite others on that journey, and the courage to face even death for the glory of God and his brothers' and sisters' eternal welfare.

Marilynne Robinson's novels drip grace; *Gilead* (2004) remains one of the most spiritually vibrant novels of the twentieth century. She is a Christian writer who doesn't avoid struggle but finds God there. When she was speaking in Sweden, she insisted on a new venture in theology, one that respects our materiality—another theme that is worthy of scholarly exploration together in terms of exploring the relationship of matter and God in a way that only dialogue across traditional boundaries would really bear fruit. She said:

One thing theology must do now is to reconsider and reject the kind of thinking that tends to devalue humankind, which is an influential tendency in modern culture, one that, not coincidentally, runs parallel to the decline of religion. This devaluing of the species in effect puts aside everything interesting about us as irrelevant to the question of our true nature. . . . A new theology should be open to . . .

. . . the sheer plenitude of things a mortal encounters [that] is a marvel in itself. . . .

A new theology must begin from and always bear in mind the fact that there is something irreducibly thrilling about the universe, whatever account is made of it. . . . It would be theistic to say that the capacity for abstract thought, for example, was introduced into humankind by some external agent. This is not my

style of theism. . . . Let us say instead that this capacity must have arisen out of the transformations potential in that first particle and realized over time, consistently with these potentialities. Then . . . there is a profound, intrinsic relationship among all forms of Being.¹²

This is the time. This is the place. This helps theology and our beautiful universities to build each other up in truth and love, not saying, in brittle tones, "This is all I am. Don't ask me to change," but saying, "Whoever I am, whoever you are, we are the Lord's. Together let's grow into the full stature of Christ."

Lessons from the Burn Unit

Finally, I also want to offer an unexpected metaphor today, which certainly wouldn't have been in this address had I not needed three and a half weeks in intensive care at the burn unit of the University of Utah Hospital after severely burning my feet. The immediate impression upon going in there was a sense of unconditional acceptance, not inappropriate for the first university founded by Brigham Young! There is a sense of entrusting each patient to participate in their own healing: a commitment to professionalism, a solidarity with those who are in pain, and a massive commitment to the progression of healing.

You might think that it is just about comfort and affirmation, but building a beloved community means seeing beyond the comfort. I will never forget seeing the sense of community that Dr. Giavonni Lewis has built in that place and the extraordinary capacity of nurses and doctors to help patients through the most difficult, stretching, and painful times. Especially moving was seeing how much it cost nurses and ward staff to help patients move sore and tight skin. One little boy—let's call him Keith—had been in that unit since the Fourth of July, when an adult had thrown a firework at him, causing significant injury. He had grown to love the staff even as they were asking him to do things that hurt. Being able to love people who help us to grow and who stand with us in our pain is a beautiful example of the nature and the cost of building a beloved community.

I have to say that I wasn't the bravest patient, and I still am not. Every day during my recovery I had a phone call from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. I think people thought he was just my imaginary friend when I first told them, but then he turned up twice with police and security, and then a lot of people wanted to see him! I told him that I had been very grumpy and that I was worried about losing my feet.

One night, when I was at my lowest, a tiny white-blond-haired five-year-old girl—let's call her Stella—came up to me as I was standing gloomily outside my room. She grasped my little finger with her tiny hand, turned me round (now that is a sight to see!), and made me walk around the ward with her. She wouldn't let go until I kissed the top of her head. Her parents and the nursing staff chuckled, but I can tell you that the characteristic hallmarks of God in Christ were there; this was indeed an angelic visitation. I had been told to turn around—*teshuvah*, *metanoia*, repent—and had been led by a little child.

Those in a healing community build a beloved community around them, often without completely comprehending what they are doing. That, in a nutshell, is what I believe we are called to do together after the long history of difficulties and division and schism between Christian communities. Beautiful friendships can flower and bear fruit between Christian communities if we are taken by the finger and turned around, after the pattern of the University of Utah burn unit.

I would like to be able to be more upbeat about the recovery of my feet. Without the daily support of Nurse Carrie Brown, for example, I don't know where on earth I would be. In some ways healing is going very well, but I am still not sure how it is going to work out. I, like everybody else, want to have the simple, straightforward solution that makes everything alright *now*. That is not the pattern of anointing and sealing that I was blessed to receive. It may well be that I have to go back into hospital again and have some more of the tissue removed, perhaps even a little toe. But before I get too morose, what's a little toe, between friends? Don't get me wrong, I would like it on my foot if possible, but having taken the initial steps of faith, we can take steeper ones.

The Ongoing Process of Discipleship

On Saturday night, a friend of mine took me to the supermarket. While I sat, waiting for him to get a bulb, the sun was setting in the west behind the mountains but still illuminating the mountain tops of the Wasatch Front, and the moon was shining with the vibrancy of a circle of lace.

The stark horizontal light showed patterns of relationship and connection in those beautiful west-facing mountains. It was a beautiful golden evening, and I thought of the writings of a great ancient Christian, Saint Gregory of Nyssa. One of his insights was that he saw Christian discipleship not just as something to be achieved—becoming a one-off possession. That is neither scholarship nor discipleship; it is, rather, the *process* of learning to walk step-by-step. As the road gets steeper, we are more equipped to take those more difficult steps, recognizing that it is an *infinite* ascent into the very being of the Father in the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This made me think of the Latter-day Saint emphasis on *continuing* and of Joseph Smith's words that echo Saint Gregory so closely:

*The nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker, and is caught up to dwell with Him. But we consider that this is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment.*¹³

However long it takes to build this enduring communion between Oxford Pembroke and BYU, I commit to journeying with you, even on these feet, however ragged they become, even if I had to walk over hot coals to get to where I am now!

This is an opportunity to say thank you for so much care in these traumatic days—in the hospital and at home—by so many wonderful people.

Thank you for allowing me to express my honest commitment to travel with you in a richness of faith that I have not otherwise experienced. I dedicate this forum address in gratitude to God for Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, my beloved friend. We love you, Elder Holland, for being committed to

building a beloved community in which a growth in love and understanding is possible.

When I first came to general conference, I was shocked to witness protesters shouting rude things at my hosts, whom I was growing to love. I thought I would walk over in my clerical collar and just make it clear to them that these are nice people: “You know these are lovely people. Why are you so cross?” The reaction was a baptism of fire into what the United States understands as freedom of speech; in the United Kingdom, it would have been called hate speech. But, nonetheless, it was embarrassing to hear some of what they said—but I felt that I could look my hosts in the eye and stand with you as you were ridiculed.

My closest friends have seen that my love for the Lord Jesus has grown exponentially because of my friendship with you, and I want to bring that to the beautifully diverse family of Christians (and people of all faiths) so that we may travel together, even across steep mountains, which will lead to our being blessed together.

I have been taught so much here, and I am profoundly aware of the inadequacy of this lengthy expression, but I thank you authentically and express my love for you, and I acknowledge that I am in your debt, a debt I can never repay.

Thank you. May God bless us in our journeying together.

Notes

1. 2 Nephi 1:25.
2. Mosiah 4:13.
3. See *Saint Benedict’s Prayer Book for Beginners* (York, England: Ampleforth Abbey Press, 1993), 14; see also Saint Benedict, abbot of Monte Cassino, *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, trans. Boniface Verheyen (Atchison, Kansas: St. Benedict’s Abbey, 1949), chapters 18 and 73.
4. James 1:21.
5. See the first line of Pope Clement I, *The First Epistle of Clemens Romanus to the Church at Corinth* (Aberdeen: J. Chalmers, 1768), 1.
6. 1 Peter 1:17.
7. Most Reverend Rowan Williams, while archbishop of Wales, on the historical etymology of *paroikousa* in ancient Alexandria; verbal communication, speaking at a diocesan clergy conference in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England, 2000.
8. Giorgio Agamben, *The Church and the Kingdom*, trans. Leland de la Durantaye (London: Seagull Books, 2012), 4.
9. Athanasian Creed, sentence 2.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 136:1–2; emphasis added.
11. “I Am a Child of God,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301.
12. Marilynne Robinson, honorary lecture at the University of Lund, Sweden, 26 May 2016; in Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 40–1, 47.
13. Joseph Smith, *HC* 2:8; from “The Elders of the Church in Kirtland, to Their Brethren Abroad,” 22 January 1834, published in *Evening and the Morning Star* 2, no. 17 (February 1834): 135.