

**“WE WILL OVERCOME”
3-21-10
REV. SUZANNE PAUL**

BY TAKING JANUARY AS MY STUDY LEAVE MONTH, I MISSED A HOLIDAY THAT I TRULY ENJOY TALKING ABOUT – THE CELEBRATION OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. ON JANUARY 17TH. I AM A VERY BIG FAN OF DR. KING – BECAUSE, AMONG ALL THE WONDERFUL THINGS HE ACCOMPLISHED FOR RACIAL EQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, HE WAS TRULY ONE OF OUR MOST HOPEFUL AMERICAN LEADERS. DURING A VERY TRYING TIME IN AMERICAN HISTORY, HE KEPT HIS MESSAGE HOPEFUL AND UPLIFTING. IT’S WHY I ADMIRE PRESIDENT OBAMA – HE TOO, IS TRYING DESPERATELY TO GIVE THE AMERICAN PEOPLE HOPE – BUT WE AGAIN ARE LIVING IN DIFFICULT TIMES AND HOPEFUL MESSAGES ARE BEING DENIGRATED DAILY BY THE CONSERVATIVE MEDIA. NEVER HAS THE MESSAGE OF HOPE FALLEN ON SO MANY DEAF EARS – IMAGINE NOT WANTING TO HEAR A HOPEFUL MESSAGE? BUT THAT’S WHERE WE ARE RIGHT NOW AS A COUNTRY AND IT’S A PRETTY SAD PLACE TO BE. ONE OF DR. KING’S DREAMS WAS THE DREAM OF WHAT HE CALLED THE “BELOVED COMMUNITY.” HIS BELOVED COMMUNITY WAS A GLOBAL VISION, A VISION OF A TIME WHEN POVERTY, HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS WOULD NOT BE TOLERATED BECAUSE HE BELIEVED THAT STANDARDS OF HUMAN DECENCY, ACCEPTED INTERNATIONALLY, WOULD NOT ALLOW IT. IN HIS BELOVED COMMUNITY, AN ALL INCLUSIVE SPIRIT WOULD REPLACE ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION. DISPUTES WOULD BE RESOLVED BY PEACEFUL CONFLICT RESOLUTION. IN HIS BELOVED COMMUNITY, LOVE AND TRUST WOULD TRIUMPH OVER FEAR AND HATRED. WELL, UNFORTUNATELY, THAT BELOVED COMMUNITY IS STILL STRUGGLING TO EMERGE. SO IF WE STILL DO NOT ENJOY THIS GLOBAL OR EVEN NATIONAL BELOVED COMMUNITY – WHERE MIGHT WE TURN DURING THESE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TIMES. I NEED NOT TELL ANY OF YOU WHAT CHALLENGES WE ARE ALL FACING AS WE WORK OUR WAY INTO 2010. THE ECONOMY IS STILL A MAJOR ISSUE FOR ALMOST EVERYONE – TODAY, SHORTLY AFTER OUR SERVICE ENDS HERE AT NEW HOPE, THE VOTE WILL BE TAKEN REGARDING HEALTH CARE AND I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THE OUTCOME WILL BE. OUR CONFIDENCE IN OUR GOVERNMENT AND OUR LEADERS – REGARDLESS OF HOW HOPEFUL THEY REMAIN – HAS BEEN SERIOUSLY

UNDERMINED. OUR DAILY LIVES HAVE CHANGED DRAMATICALLY IN THE PAST TWO YEARS AND I DON'T KNOW A SINGLE PERSON WHO IS NOT LIVING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF ALL THE DECEIT AND DISHONESTY THAT HAS PLAGUED OUR COUNTRY FOR TOO LONG NOW. I BELIEVE THAT IF GOD ALMIGHTY SHOWED UP AT THE CAPITAL TODAY – FOX NEWS WOULD FIND A WAY TO DISCREDIT HIS APPEARANCE. NO ONE AND NOTHING IS SACRED. SO WHERE CAN WE TURN AND WHO CAN WE TRUST? I BELIEVE THAT IT IS TO OUR FAITH COMMUNITY – OUR VERY OWN BELOVED COMMUNITY – THAT WE WILL FIND THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE TO SEE US THROUGH THESE DIFFICULT TIMES. BELOVED COMMUNITY IS A WONDERFUL PLACE TO BE WHEN THINGS ARE GOING WELL – BUT IT IS EVEN MORE WONDERFUL TO KNOW IT IS THERE FOR US WHEN TIMES ARE BAD. THIS MORNING, WE HAVE ALL MADE A CHOICE. WE CHOSE TO COME TOGETHER IN A MUTUAL BOND OF RESPECT AND LOVE AND SUPPORT. SOMETIMES WITHIN OUR FAITH COMMUNITIES WE STRUGGLE WITH EXACTLY WHAT SHOULD OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY LOOK LIKE – AFTER ALL, CONFLICTS CAN AND DO ARISE. YET I AM CONVINCED THAT THE TASK FOR EACH OF US IS NO LESS DAUNTING THAN THE TASK THAT LAY BEFORE THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS BACK IN THE 1960'S. GRANTED, THE SCALE IS SMALLER, THE CAUSE LESS URGENT, BUT THE GOAL IS THE SAME – AND THEREFORE, NO LESS IMPORTANT. IT IS ALL ABOUT HOW WE RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER, HOW WE EXPRESS OURSELVES AND HOW WE CONTRIBUTE TO THE CREATION OF A PEACEFUL BELOVED COMMUNITY. IN AN ARTICLE IN THE AUTUMN 2004 ISSUE OF THE UU MUSICIANS NETWORK NEWSLETTER, THE THEN PRESIDENT, KEN HERMAN WROTE: “THE VARIETY FOUND IN OUR HYMNAL, SINGING THE LIVING TRADITION, POINTS OUT THAT NO OTHER FAITH TRADITION REQUIRES ITS ADHERENTS TO SWIM IN SUCH A DIVERSE TRADITION. HIS POINT IS THAT SINGING HYMNS THAT WE MIGHT NOT AGREE WITH, THAT DON'T SPEAK TO OUR BELIEFS SPECIFICALLY, OR MAYBE THAT WE DON'T EVEN LIKE, DEMONSTRATES A SPIRITUAL WILLINGNESS TO UNDERSTAND SOMETHING THAT IS “DIFFERENT.” THIS IS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, AND THE FULL RANGE OF THAT PLURALISM FOUND IN OUR HYMNAL CALLS US TO HEAR BOTH CONTRAST AND CHALLENGE FROM UNFAMILIAR AND SOMETIMES EVEN UNPLEASANT STRANDS. HERMAN REMINDS US THAT IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM WE ALL CLAIM TO BE GRATEFUL FOR THIS RELIGIOUS PLURALISM. BUT IS THAT TRUE? ARE WE ALL

REALLY GRATEFUL FOR THE DIVERSITY IN OUR MIDST? ARE WE GRATEFUL FOR THOSE WHOSE PERSONALITIES WE FIND ECCENTRIC? ARE WE GRATEFUL FOR THOSE WHO HOLD DIFFERENT POLITICAL VIEWS THAN OURS? ARE WE GRATEFUL WHEN OUR SUNDAY HYMN IS UNFAMILIAR? WELL, GRATEFUL MIGHT BE TOO STRONG A WORD. WE CAN DISAGREE AND STILL REMAIN RESPECTFUL AND SUPPORTIVE OF ONE ANOTHER – AND THAT CAN ONLY HAPPEN IN AN ENVIRONMENT THAT FEELS SAFE. AND IN A TIME WHEN WE ARE FEELING SO VULNERABLE TO THE WHIMS OF THOSE WHO SEEMINGLY ARE IN CHARGE OF OUR FATE, FINDING A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHERE OUR DIFFERENCES ARE RESPECTED AND ACCEPTED – IS A BELOVED PLACE, INDEED. DR. KING WAS OFTEN QUOTED AS SAYING “INJUSTICE ANYWHERE IS INJUSTICE EVERYWHERE.” THIS COULD APPLY TO OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY. THE ABSENCE OF SUPPORT AND LOVE FOR ANY ONE OF US, CAN RIPPLE THROUGHOUT OUR COMMUNITY AND SPREAD THAT LACK OF SUPPORT AND LOVE EVERYWHERE. BECAUSE IN THE END IT DOESN’T MATTER WHICH HYMNS WE SING, ONLY THAT WE SING TOGETHER. IN THIS SPIRIT, WE EMBRACE OUR DIFFERENCES WITH GRATITUDE BUT ALSO FOR THE FACT THAT WE HAVE THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE TO BE A PART OF THIS BELOVED COMMUNITY. STUDIES ARE SHOWING THAT DURING REALLY TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES, FEWER PEOPLE SEEK OUT A FAITH COMMUNITY. THIS IS SO TRAGIC BECAUSE IT IS PARTICULARLY DURING DIFFICULT ECONOMIC TIMES THAT PEOPLE NEED TO FIND A BELOVED COMMUNITY. I BELIEVE THIS IS TRUE, IN LARGE PART, BECAUSE THE CULTURE OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IS TO WANT TO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT THEIR BELOVED COMMUNITY. OUR PURITAN WORK ETHIC COMPELS US TO WANT TO PAY WHATEVER WE PERCEIVE AS OUR FAIR SHARE TO THE COMMUNITY. WITH SO MANY PEOPLE OUT OF WORK AND OTHERS WHO ARE FEARFUL OF LOSING THEIR JOBS, THEY ARE HESITANT TO ATTEND SERVICES FOR FEAR OF NOT BEING ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE. ALTHOUGH I CAN’T SPEAK FOR OTHER DENOMINATIONS, I CAN ASSURE YOU THAT UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCHES DO NOT EVER TURN ANYONE AWAY BECAUSE OF THEIR INABILITY TO FINANCIALLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE COMMUNITY. AND NEW HOPE IS CERTAINLY NO EXCEPTION. THERE ARE MANY WAYS PEOPLE CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR BELOVED COMMUNITY – PEOPLE GIVE OF THEIR TIME, THEIR SKILLS, THEIR TALENTS AND YES, THEIR MONEY AS WELL. BUT NO ONE SHOULD

EVER FEEL THAT THEY ARE NOT SUPPORTING THEIR BELOVED COMMUNITY IF THEY ARE UNABLE TO MAKE A SUBSTANTIAL PLEDGE OR DONATE TO THE YEARLY OPERATING EXPENSES. NEVER A COMMUNITY TO REST ON OUR LAURELS, NEW HOPE HAS NOW EMBARKED ON A CAPITOL CAMPAIGN TO RAISE MONEY TO PURCHASE THIS BUILDING. WE HAVE KNOWN SINCE WE GATHERED IN JANUARY, 2006 THAT HAVING OUR OWN SPACE IS THE KEY TO BUILDING A STRONG FAITH COMMUNITY. AND SO NOW THE OPPORTUNITY HAS PRESENTED ITSELF TO MAKE AN OFFER TO OUR CURRENT LANDLORD TO PURCHASE THIS BUILDING. WE ARE HOPEFUL THAT EVERY ONE WILL BE ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE SOMETHING TOWARD THE DOWN PAYMENT – BUT WE ALSO KNOW THAT THAT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE FOR EVERYONE. WE RECOGNIZE THAT ONE’S ABILITY TO FINANCIALLY CONTRIBUTE IS NOT THE MEASURE OF THEIR VALUE TO OUR COMMUNITY. AS MORE AND MORE OF US STRUGGLE TO MAKE ENDS MEET AND WORRY ABOUT SENDING OUR KIDS TO CAMP OR COLLEGE, OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY RECOGNIZES THAT WE ALL HAVE TO PRIORITIZE THOSE THINGS THAT ARE MOST IMPORTANT TO OUR FAMILY’S WELFARE. I HAVE GREAT CONFIDENCE THAT EVERYONE HERE AT NEW HOPE CARES GREATLY FOR THEIR FAITH COMMUNITY AND HAS SHOWN THEIR CARE AND SUPPORT TIME AND TIME AGAIN. NO ONE SHOULD EVER FEEL THAT THEIR VALUE AS A MEMBER OR FRIEND OF NEW HOPE IS BASED ON A DOLLAR FIGURE. WHEN I SIT DOWN WITH PERSPECTIVE NEW MEMBERS, I TAKE GREAT PAINS IN EXPLAINING THAT CONTRIBUTING FINANCIALLY TO NEW HOPE IS ALWAYS A CHOICE AND WHAT THAT DOLLAR FIGURE IS MUST BE AT THEIR DISCRETION AND THAT THEIR CONTRIBUTION IS ALWAYS KEPT CONFIDENTIAL. ONLY ONE PERSON IN THIS CONGREGATION HAS THAT INFORMATION, AND THAT IS OUR BOARD TREASURER. BUT AS A MEMBER OF NEW HOPE, THERE IS AN EXPECTATION THAT EACH MEMBER WILL BRING THEIR SUPPORT AND LOVE TO OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY. WHEN WE CLOSE OUR SHARING OF JOYS & SORROWS, I TAKE IT VERY SERIOUSLY WHEN I SAY “I LIGHT THIS LAST CANDLE FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO HAVE YOUR JOYS LEFT UNSAID AND SORROWS TOO DEEP TO EXPRESS.” SOMETIMES IT IS JUST NOT POSSIBLE TO SHARE VERBALLY EITHER A JOY OR SORROW IN A VERY PUBLIC WAY. BUT THAT DOES NOT DIMINISH THE FACT THAT WE HAVE THESE FEELINGS AND EVEN IF WE DON’T SAY THEM OUT LOUD, BY LIGHTING THAT LAST CANDLE AND PAUSING FOR A FEW MOMENTS –

YOUR BELOVED COMMUNITY IS SILENTLY THERE FOR YOU. WE ARE ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS BY BEING TOGETHER AND RESPECTING YOUR SILENCE. DR. KING TALKED ABOUT “BEING A GREAT COVENANT TO EACH OTHER.” AS A BELOVED COMMUNITY WE ARE IN A GREAT COVENANT WITH ONE ANOTHER. IT IS OUR WILLINGNESS TO STAND TOGETHER AS EQUALS THAT CEMENTS OUR COVENANT. IN OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY WE HAVE A SAFE HAVEN, AWAY FROM THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF OUR EVERYDAY LIFE. MAYBE IN OUR FAMILY OR OUR WORK PLACE OR OUR NEIGHBORHOOD, WE ARE NOT VALUED FOR OUR UNIQUENESS, BUT IN OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY WE ARE ALWAYS WELCOME. NOW I AM NOT NAÏVE, I KNOW THAT ISSUES CAN AND DO ARISE WITHIN BELOVED COMMUNITIES. SOMETIMES THERE CAN BE MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND HURT FEELINGS. BUT WE MUST NEVER DRAW LINES OF WHO IS IN AND WHO IS OUT, LINES WHICH REGULATE WHAT BELIEFS ARE EMBRACED AND WHICH ARE NOT. WHO’S OPINION IS RIGHT AND WHO’S IS WRONG. AND OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY IS NOT THE PLACE WHERE WE GET TO SING ONLY THE HYMNS WE LIKE ACCOMPANIED BY THE INSTRUMENT OF OUR CHOOSING. TO SING WHOLEHEARTEDLY, EVEN IF YOU DON’T KNOW OR LIKE THE HYMN, IS TO PARTICIPATE IN SOLIDARITY WITH OTHERS. I’LL EVEN GIVE YOU A LITTLE TIP – IF SINGING THE SONG IS TOO DIFFICULT, JUST SAY THE WORDS. DEBBY AND I TRY TO CHOOSE HYMNS MORE FOR THEIR LYRICAL MESSAGE THAN THEIR MUSICALITY – WHICH WE BOTH READILY ADMIT CAN BE CHALLENGING. SO JUST SAY THE WORDS IF YOU CAN’T SING THEM. THE GREAT BLESSING OF BELOVED COMMUNITY IS THAT IT AFFORDS EACH ONE OF US THE OPPORTUNITY WHERE WE CAN ACHIEVE HARMONY. A PEACEFUL HARMONY THAT MAY NOT BE POSSIBLE IN OTHER AREAS OF OUR LIFE. WHEN WE ARE FEELING ESPECIALLY UNHINGED WITH ALL THE DIFFICULTIES OF WORK, HEALTH AND FAMILY – OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY CAN BE OUR OASIS. LAST SUNDAY HERE AT NEW HOPE REPRESENTED TO ME ALL THE BEST THAT A BELOVED COMMUNITY CAN BE. IN THE MORNING WE HAD OUR SUNDAY CELEBRATION OF LIFE SERVICE, FOLLOWED BY A WONDERFUL COFFEE HOUR FILLED WITH HOME-MADE GOODIES AND SPIRITED CONVERSATION. LATER IN THE AFTERNOON, MANY OF US YOUNG AND OLD ALIKE, CAME TOGETHER TO PARTICIPATE IN AN OLD-FASHIONED SING-A-LONG. FOLLOWING THE SING-A-LONG, OTHERS ARRIVED TO BEAT THE WINTER BLAHS BY EATING A

BARBEQUED HOT DOG AND TRY THEIR HAND AT CONQUERING THE HULA HOOP. I THINK DELANEY DEMETER UNOFFICIALLY TOOK FIRST PRIZE IN HULA HOOPING. I THOUGHT THE DAY TRULY REPRESENTED THE BEST THAT A BELOVED COMMUNITY CAN OFFER ITS MEMBERS AND FRIENDS. A GATHERING OF PEOPLE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER – IN COMMUNITY WITH ONE ANOTHER. I CHOSE MY TITLE “WE WILL OVERCOME” BECAUSE I BELIEVE WE WILL, AS A BELOVED COMMUNITY OVERCOME OUR INDIVIDUAL ADVERSITIES BY BEING IN COVENANT WITH ONE ANOTHER. AS MY DEAR FRIEND, RABBI SHERWIN WINE, USED TO SAY “WE CAN DO SO MUCH MORE TOGETHER THAN WE CAN EVER DO ALONE.” THAT IS THE POWER OF BEING IN COMMUNITY. WE COME WITH ALL OUR VARIOUS STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, JOYS AND SORROWS, AND FORM A COVENANT OF SUPPORT AND LOVE FOR THE MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF OUR BELOVED COMMUNITY. IT IS WITHIN THIS COVENANT AND SUPPORT THAT WE CAN OVERCOME WHATEVER COMES OUR WAY – FOR WE ARE NEVER ALONE. SO BE IT.

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**SOURCES USED IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS PAPER:
“BELOVED COMMUNITY” FIRST UU CHURCH
JULIE STONEBERG, JANUARY 16, 2005**