As we headed into the 2020 election season, I recalled the night after Election Day 2016. At three a.m. our bedroom door swung open, interrupting my very restless sleep. Half-delirious, I could see the silhouette of my then five-year-old son Joshua standing over me and my wife. Joshua had a distraught look on his face. He told us that he “needed to know who won the election.”

As much as my wife and I had tried to shield our two sons from the toxic rhetoric that characterized so much of the 2016 presidential race—a seemingly impossible task when living in the Washington, DC, area—our sons had internalized far more than we had realized. My wife and I exchanged a pained look and then stumbled through a barely coherent explanation of Mr. Trump’s likely victory. Joshua responded, “I don’t understand how someone who has said and done such mean things can win.”

His poignant comment triggered deep anguish within me—not just because of the electoral results, but due to the troubled state of our nation’s soul spotlighted by the outcome. At a profound level, my son had articulated why I felt such heartbreak and trepidation that night. His young mind had intuited something more substantial than simple political disappointment: I felt a deep sense of betrayal by the electoral outcome—but not because our nation had elected a president whose ideology and policy priorities diverged from my own. Rather, it was because so many Americans, particularly white Christians, voted for a candidate despite (and in some cases because of) the fact that he falsely represented himself as an economic populist and ran a campaign based on fear and hate, exploiting and manipulating some of our nation’s worst impulses.

After seeing our tortured reaction, my son—in what felt like a reversal of roles—said reassuringly, “It will be OK because you and Mommy will make it OK.” At that moment, I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders.

As I tried to answer my son’s continuing questions, I was responding not just as a father but in particular as the father of two Black boys who will grow up in the midst of a racially polarized America. I was responding as the son of a Black mother and white father who made the controversial decision to marry soon after interracial marriage was made legal across the country by the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision. I was also responding
as a Christian and an ordained minister of a gospel that mandates that I love my neighbors and my enemies and teaches me that ultimately, I must put my hope and trust in God, not in politics or political leaders.

At the time, I was leading the Faith Initiative at the World Bank Group. But that morning after the election in 2016, I knew in my spirit that it was time to leave my comfortable position there. My work at the World Bank was meaningful, but I knew I would be unable in that role to engage in the kind of advocacy and transformation that would be necessary in light of the new political context in this country. It took a year to make the transition, but I then rejoined the Christian social justice organization Sojourners, where I had served as senior political director and board chair and where I am now president.

The voice of my son—his trust that I would be part of “making it OK”—had ignited a restlessness in me and made it clear that it was time to more fully engage in the struggle for “a more perfect union,” the struggle for the soul of our nation and a radically more just society. If my family were to stay, I needed to be all-in. I needed to join forces with others who were determined to mobilize around a different story of America, one that embodies our deepest civic and religious values.

This book looks at the meta-story that we tell ourselves and hold as true about our nation’s history, character, and ideals. It is about replacing distorted and sometimes destructive myths and stories with a larger narrative based on a more honest and holistic understanding of our nation’s history and our most cherished ideals. It is about embracing a moral vision for our future that is aligned with our deepest religious values and civic ideals. It is about telling a bigger story of us, which I believe can be best told through the story of building the Beloved Community.

And it is about applying that moral vision to many of the most intractable and pressing issues facing our nation and world—from gun violence to immigration, from protecting life at every stage to transforming our policing and criminal justice system, from ending extreme poverty to combating climate change. This book is about seizing this opportunity to form a more perfect union by building a radically more just nation and in the process experiencing the Beloved Community together.
The book is divided into three parts:
Part I makes the case for why the nation needs a new unifying vision of the Beloved Community. This new vision requires examining and replacing spiritual lies and distorted narratives with redemptive truths that help move the nation from our current state of hyper-polarization toward justice and community.

Part II addresses the building blocks of the Beloved Community. Each building block requires overcoming forces and trends such as toxic polarization, a nationalistic form of patriotism, and mistruths and misunderstandings of our nation’s history.

Finally, Part III explores the practical questions, as well as core attitudes and commitments, around realizing that vision.

Each chapter in Part III details a “beatitude” (literally, blessing) consisting of a fundamental value that is a component of building the Beloved Community. These beatitudes include a renewed investment in equality, interdependence, radical welcome, environmental stewardship, nonviolence, and dignity for all. Living out these vital “beatitudes” can help us address the most vexing and pressing social and political issues we face.

I grew up in the shadow of the civil rights movement, believing that I was born in the wrong era. The conviction that my generation had inherited the unfinished business of that movement was instilled in me by my parents. More than two decades before the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement, I came of age with the hope that the animating vision of the civil rights movement was still alive and simply needed to be recast and revitalized. What is required to capture the moral imagination and aspirations of subsequent generations, including my own, is the vision of this book and my life work.

It is easy to freeze-frame and sanitize the daring vision and aspirations of the civil rights movement as only being something from a bygone era. And many of us have seen that vision derailed and overshadowed by the culture wars, a rapacious form of capitalism, and political schism. We have
seen many aspects of civil rights history erased or altered to make the past more palatable. We are often quick to embrace the Dr. King of Montgomery and Selma but tend to ignore his broader vision of dismantling the triplets of racism, militarism, and materialism. When we romanticize or whitewash the civil rights movement’s vision, we become blind to the movement’s far-reaching call for transformation, which is still relevant and powerful today.

When I look back over American history and at other movements pushing for real change, the Beloved Community stands out as the most holistic and transformational moral vision capable of uniting a severely divided nation. Coined in the early days of the twentieth century by philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, the term was used by him and then by other leaders of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith organization founded in 1915. Martin Luther King Jr., who was also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, popularized the term.

To King, the Beloved Community wasn’t a belief in a utopian dream but, according to the Martin Luther King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, “a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.”

In the 1960s, King and other civil rights leaders often referenced the pursuit of the Beloved Community in their speeches, writings, and public pronouncements. One of the earliest and most authoritative speeches King gave that referenced the Beloved Community was in 1956. He spoke at a victory rally following the announcement of a favorable Supreme Court decision desegregating the buses of Montgomery, Alabama. Even in a moment in which King and other activists sacrificed so much while making what may have seemed at the time like small gains, he saw the glory of the bigger picture and the ultimate goal: “The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”

Building on this vision, our task today is to reinterpret and contemporize the Beloved Community for our own social and political moment.
Reenvisioning the Beloved Community calls us to draw on foundational religious and civic ideals. It means that we live into deeper commitments that allow us to build that community today. It means we recognize key markers of the Beloved Community and build on these, including equality rooted in *imago dei* (the image of God in everyone), radical welcome, *ubuntu* interdependence, restorative stewardship, nonviolence, and dignity for all.

This oft-neglected narrative still has the power to unite us and bridge our deep divisions, in part because it hasn’t yet been co-opted or politicized. The pursuit of an expanded and reimagined Beloved Community combines civic humanitarianism with deep spiritual and religious values. It’s a vision that resonates across religions and with the nonreligious. And it’s a vision with the ability to disarm the myths and divisive forces that haunt our nation.

The deep spiritual and theological roots of the civil rights struggle are often ignored or understated. But without its deep religiosity and spirituality—the fuel and inspiration that so often made great sacrifice and moral resistance possible—there is no movement. While in some respects America is less religious that it was in the 1950s and ’60s, it is still a deeply religious and spiritual nation. Secular arguments alone, I believe, will not be strong and resilient enough to catalyze the depth of change necessary to defeat the lie of white supremacy and build the Beloved Community.

Since faith leaders can become intoxicated with the pursuit of power and co-opted by those same powers, we must resist politicizing religion to advance overly ideological or purely partisan agendas. But just like the civil rights leaders of the past, we must find ways to shake moderate Christians out of apolitical hibernation and help them recognize that the pursuit of the Beloved Community is at the heart of the work of the church and is an essential manifestation of discipleship. This is true for Jews, Muslims, and people of other religions or no religion as well.

The Beloved Community cannot be reduced to a bumper sticker or defined through a single slogan. But my summary of a new vision for the Beloved Community—my remix, as it were—is to build a nation in which neither punishment nor privilege is viciously attached to one’s race, skin color, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or sexuality.
Ensuring that punishment and privilege are no longer tied to any of these central identities represents a standard for the Beloved Community that poses a high bar, but this must become a barometer by which we measure political leadership and public policy. Living up to these standards would mean that every person, all of whom are made in the image of God, would be equally valued and respected and that their dignity would be affirmed. Modern-day America is alarmingly far from achieving these commitments, because the legacy of oppression and discrimination continues to show up in the present, which is compounded by ongoing systemic injustices and inequality.

Punishment continues to be tied to race in America, as evidenced by egregious racial disparities in police stops and arrests and judicial sentencing for similar crimes. Until Black lives are presumed innocent rather than so often guilty and there is truly equal justice under the law, we have urgent work to do to achieve this first standard. Privileges also remain starkly entrenched, with deep-seated racial disparities in wealth, income, education, employment, and housing—all tied to the legacy of the past and to the continuation of discriminatory policies, systems, and attitudes.

The Beloved Community cannot be defined only around what shouldn’t happen—it must also be defined around a positive vision of the preferred future. Imagining together what ought to be requires a deeper unpacking of the qualifier “beloved.” The word beloved signifies what we most value and cherish. Beloved starts from a standpoint of steadfast love, which involves mutual regard and mutual concern. It requires a commitment to empathy. In a spiritual and religious sense, beloved starts with an understanding and a belief that we are beloved by God—that God knows everything about us, including our vices, shortcomings, and contradictions, and loves us anyway. In Beloved Community, radically inclusive and resilient love is the norm. It is a community in which we are constantly seeking to build and restore right relationships. In Beloved Community, the needs of the most vulnerable are recognized and prioritized, because the moral test of our society is around how the most vulnerable people, including children and the elderly, are faring. In Beloved Community, our differences stemming from ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality are not feared or scapegoated but are celebrated and embraced. In Beloved
Community, a commitment to honor and protect human dignity becomes a sacred and shared responsibility.

While my point of reference for the Beloved Community is tied to the civil rights movement and the lived theology of the Black church, a similar moral vision is expressed in other religions, cultural communities, and movements. While the words beloved and community are not always used, the meaning behind them shows up across many cultural and religious traditions.

The concept of Beloved Community combines a commitment to treating every person as beloved with a commitment to affirming and strengthening the bonds of community. In many ways this taps into the conventionally progressive emphasis on rights and justice as well as the conventionally conservative emphasis on community and freedom. Unlike the term social justice, the term Beloved Community hasn’t been overly politicized, misappropriated, or co-opted. A commitment to an enlarged sense of community protects us from the dangers of feeling isolated and retreating into rigid and narrow tribes. In embracing the power of an enlarged community, we must understand the distinction between community and nation; nations are defined by borders, communities by relationships—including, in our digital age, ones that are built virtually. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, the Beloved Community must encompass global realities and a global worldview. It is not by any means a solely American project. Among the reminders of this interdependence are the overwhelming global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing crisis of climate change.

This moral vision is broad enough to include disaffected white, working-class Americans who feel left behind and have been swayed by a politics of fear and grievance instead of by a politics of justice and inclusion. The Beloved Community has arms wide and strong enough for all of America, including those known as Dreamers and others in immigrant communities, those from religious traditions considered outside the mainstream, and those who have been left out and left behind—from Midwestern towns and rural farms to Indigenous reservations and blighted cities or suburbs—red, blue, and everything in between.

Building the Beloved Community requires truth-telling and repentance about our past. Instead of inciting guilt and casting blame, the Beloved
Community is built on a foundation that generates empathy and galvanizes a greater commitment to justice. It will involve communicating a compelling moral vision and a persuasive practical case for why the multiracial democracy that we are increasingly becoming can generate greater belonging, shared thriving, and common purpose for all Americans.

Building the Beloved Community is never a simple task. If it were, we would not be in the national conflict and crisis we are in now. But I have the audacity to believe that despite the founders’ flaws and prejudices, they understood something deeply profound when they fashioned America’s ideals and set us on a path of constant striving to achieve a more perfect union. Yes, the American project is worth redeeming and fighting for. And the imperative to build the Beloved Community requires the involvement of all of us.

Imagine what it would look like if America sought to embody the Beloved Community. Feelings of isolation, loneliness, resentment, and contempt could be replaced by a deep sense of belonging rooted in a shared moral vision that offers inclusion, that welcomes and values everyone. The Beloved Community can’t be reduced to an abstract, amorphous concept or utopian dream. As we will explore, it is a practical vision, made real through lived expressions and replicable commitments that are contagious and liberating.

I was inspired by the civil rights struggle and understood that building a more just and inclusive world required concrete commitments, actions, and sacrifices at every level—from the personal to the economic, social, and political. These decisions have led me again and again to return to the Beloved Community as a way of living into and expanding the work that the prophets and those in the early church began and that King and other civil rights leaders courageously continued. If this moral vision resonates with you, explore with me how we can become co-creators and co-architects of the Beloved Community.

This is the end of the complimentary excerpt.

A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community, by Adam Russell Taylor will be released on September 14, 2021, and is available for pre-order now in hardcover, ebook, and audio book formats. To order your copy visit sojo.net/AMPU or your favorite bookstore.