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## *Beloved Community* – An Overview

**An article from the *Cathedral Times* by  
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When I heard the devastating news from Tucson about the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and the killing of six others, I was on retreat with the Chapter of the Cathedral of St. Philip. (The Chapter is the elected group of eighteen lay leaders of the Cathedral; four canons and I were also there.) We were in the snow-covered mountains of North Georgia, preparing for the year. Suddenly, my outlook saddened. I was struck deeply by the news, not just because the violence was senseless and in such a public space, but because I admire public servants.

We need politicians. We need public servants, who are called and willing to enter our public places and care for them. Public servants always risk their time, their honor, and their reputation; they are not supposed to be risking their physical lives. On our Cathedral Chapter this year, and on retreat with us, was the sister of one of Georgia's statewide elected officials; she knows better than I what her brother must endure and care for. I am sure she heard the Tucson news with special sensitivity, too.

We need politicians, politicians who take challenges and make themselves vulnerable. However, the Tucson events reminded me that, at some level, we are all politicians. We all have a place, politically, in this democratic republic of the United States of America, and we all take risks. The victims of the Tucson shootings, from a federal judge to a nine-year old child, were fulfilling their roles in the public sphere. They were showing up for a good old-fashioned "Meet your Congressperson" event. People and politicians were doing what we were supposed to be doing.

The theme I presented to the Cathedral Chapter was "Beloved Community." It is the image with which I view the future. The Cathedral of St. Philip has the gift, in our times, of being a beloved community; all churches in these times have that gift. Our gift of beloved community enriches us, but it can also serve as a model of community for the world around us.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was fond of the phrase "beloved community," and I associate the image with him; but he was not its originator. I would claim that its origin goes back to the New Testament itself. "Beloved" is a dear phrase in the New Testament, from the instant in which Jesus is called "beloved" at his baptism, to the countless instances in which Saint Paul describes his church members as "beloved" (five times in the Epistle to the Philippians). God really does love Jesus, who called the church into being. The church's great apostle, Paul, really did love his people. The church is meant to be a community, beloved of God, beloved by each other, and beloved for the world.

In a time when our culture is confused about community, I believe the church has the calling and gift to be true community, to be "Beloved Community." We are meant to gather together, to learn and laugh together, to love and cry together. And, together, we account for each other. We teach each other and hold each other to standards of civility and grace. We love (and live) for the long term and not the short term. The Christian Church, at our best, offers true and beloved community.

I am way down the line when it comes to being qualified to speculate about why the Tucson shootings occurred. Like you, I have read and listened to all sorts of reactions. But most of them leave me concerned that our various speculations and reactions to the shootings have become further elements of our polarized divisions. Even our various reactions to a tragedy

have become occasions for antagonistic extremes.

I do not want to speculate too extremely myself. The simplest explanation for the Tucson violence is a deranged person. But I would also suggest that people who resort to violence are not, unfortunately, part of beloved communities. For various reasons, they sadly do not belong to communities who offer measured grace and civil relationship over the long term. People who resort to violence are not part of healthy religious communities, healthy Christian churches, healthy Jewish synagogues, or healthy Muslim mosques. My sad comment about the Tucson shooter is that he did not have beloved community.

The way out of random acts of violence is the way of community. I mean healthy, life-giving, community; and I mean beloved community. It is beloved community that sustains daily interactions of civility and sustenance. With others, face to face, and sometimes arm to arm, hand in hand, we learn how to behave in the world. We learn how to care, and we learn how to express disapproval with peace and honor.

Finally, of course, in a beloved community, our ultimate values are the same values as the One who "loves" us. And it is a peaceful and just God who loves us. Such is the God who inspired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to realize that the church's values of peace and non-violence could be a model for the world around us. That world certainly includes the political world, in which we all play a part. Dr. King's vision of a beloved community came to include, not just the church, but the world itself. And that is our calling, too. All of us have a part in today's political world, to risk ourselves, to give ourselves, to the peace and love, honor and respect, of a truly beloved community. I thank God for everyone who shows up in the public square, for the common good, to take that risk.

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