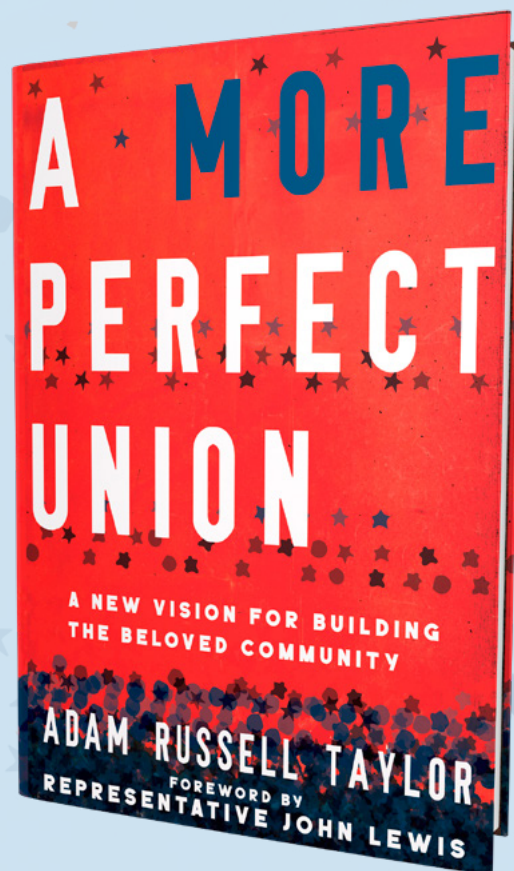


# BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY



**AN 8-PART STUDY GUIDE FOR**  
***A MORE PERFECT UNION: A NEW VISION***  
***FOR BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY***  
**BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE** / 3

**SESSION ONE:** A Bigger Story of Us (Prologue, Introduction, and Chapter 1) / 4

**SESSION TWO:** A Vision for National Rebirth (Chapters 2–4) / 5

**SESSION THREE:** Dispelling Myths and Telling the Whole Truth (Chapters 5–6) / 7

**SESSION FOUR:** Polarization, Partisanship, and Patriotism (Chapters 7–8) / 9

**SESSION FIVE:** Beatitudes, Part One: Equality and Welcome (Chapters 9–10) / 11

**SESSION SIX:** Beatitudes, Part Two: Interdependence and Nonviolence (Chapters 11–12) / 13

**SESSION SEVEN:** Beatitudes, Part Three: Environmental Stewardship and Dignity (Chapters 13–14) / 15

**SESSION EIGHT:** Beatitudes, Part Four: Democracy (Chapter 15 and Epilogue) / 16

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This discussion guide is intended for small groups, Bible studies, book clubs, and individuals who wish to actively discuss and explore what it means to build the Beloved Community and how they can get started in their own lives and communities. Organized around key topics in *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community* by Adam Russell Taylor, the guide provides public-domain video clips, poses questions to facilitate conversation and action, and offers suggested scripture passages and a prayer for each session.

The guide is divided into eight sessions, each of which corresponds to 2-3 chapters in the book. Resources for each of these sessions are provided, but no specific structure for the sessions is required or recommended. Within each session, the leader and participants should use their own judgment about how many video clips to watch, whether to use the scripture readings and prayers, and which discussion questions to tackle. The intent of these resources is to foster rich, civil, and constructive conversations and actions, and we urge group leaders to use the resources in whatever ways work best for their group.

Please note that while the material in this guide builds on and seeks to animate themes and content in the book, it does not necessarily reflect the views of Adam Taylor or Sojourners. This discussion guide is provided with the aim of fostering deep and even transformational conversations.

# SESSION ONE: A BIGGER STORY OF US

## (PROLOGUE, INTRODUCTION, AND CHAPTER 1)

### SESSION DESCRIPTION

Bringing forth the Beloved Community in the United States requires telling a bigger story of us: where we are now and what we can become in the future. This means 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.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to you to tell “a bigger story of us”? What aspirational story do you think best captures what you want America to be?
2. Do you believe the United States can be redeemed? Why or why not?
3. The book mentions that the United States has not been this polarized since the 1960s. Do you agree? How concerned are you about that polarization? What forces and causes do you think are behind our deepening divisions and polarization?
4. In your view, how do we get from where the country is today to the vision of a Beloved Community set forth by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and so many other civil rights leaders? Where should we start? What do you think some of the steps will be along the way? What do you see as the main challenges?
5. Can you share some examples of *framing*, as Adam Taylor discusses in chapter 1, that you have recently encountered in your daily life? Can you think of some beneficial uses of framing? What about harmful uses? Can you think of a time when someone's *reframing* of a position or contentious issue changed your perspective?

### VIDEO CLIPS

- ▶ [Eddie Glaude Jr. “Begin Again” and Lessons from James Baldwin \(interview with Trevor Noah\)](#) (9m9s)
- ▶ [New “Hidden Tribes” study shows major divide in the country](#) (3m29s)
- ▶ [Dr. Bernice King speaks at John Lewis’s funeral](#) (7m37s)

### SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

John 13:31-35  
1 John 4:4-11  
Isaiah 11:1-9

### PRAYER

We need to communicate with each other across abysses of separation.

How can we let you into our lives, Lord, if we shut out our sisters and brothers who share the earth with us?

From the bitterness and loneliness of keeping you and other people outside our lives, save us, God. Nurture in us your love of the whole of life that you have created.

Let us be faithful followers of your way of responsibility, unselfish involvement in your people wherever they are found, and love.

—Malcolm Boyd, United States, from *Prayers Encircling the World*  
(Westminster John Knox Press)

# SESSION TWO: A VISION FOR NATIONAL REBIRTH

## (CHAPTERS 2–4)

### SESSION DESCRIPTION

Being born again is not limited to individual experience. Communities and societies can also be reborn as a result of shared transformational experiences. To be reborn as one nation, we must make a firm choice in favor of embracing and becoming a multiracial, multireligious democracy and dismantling the lie of white supremacy, as well as healing and repairing the nation's deep wounds.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does rebirth mean to you? Do you have any personal experiences of rebirth, such as the one Adam Taylor describes at Victoria Falls in chapter 2? What would national rebirth mean to you? What are the biggest opportunities and challenges to the United States experiencing a rebirth?
2. What did you learn from this book about the systemic nature of racism? What are some examples that you have seen and/or experienced of systemic racism? What are some ways to help more of our nation to see growing racial diversity as a strength and not a threat?
3. Building on the definition in chapter 3, how have you tried to be an ally to those who have been marginalized or victimized in your personal, professional, and/or church life? Where do you see room for growth?
4. What resonates with you the most about the moral vision of the Beloved Community? Building on the definition and diverse perspectives offered in chapter 4, how do you define the Beloved Community in your own words?
5. What are some examples of bridge-building to advance justice and the common good that you've personally witnessed or been a part of? What are the biggest challenges that you've experienced or that you can think of to effectively build bridges across various types of difference? How can those challenges be overcome, or how were they overcome? Can you think of some additional ways you might participate in bridge-building after reading these chapters and having this discussion?
6. Recognizing that present-day advocates for reparations generally favor approaches that are both more holistic and more targeted than simply issuing checks, what are your views on reparations for slavery? If you were in charge of implementing reparations on a national, state, or local level, how do you think you might approach it? What types of policies and programs would you implement and why?

### VIDEO CLIPS

-  [An author's eulogy for "White Christian America"—PBS NewsHour interview with Robert P. Jones](#) (6m9s)
-  [The Case for Reparations Goes to Congress](#) (6m6s)
-  [Kimberlé Crenshaw at Ted + Animation – Kimberlé Crenshaw explains Intersectionality](#) (5m57s)

### SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

John 3:1-21  
Acts 2:42-47  
Galatians 3:26-29

## **PRAYER**

God, grant us wisdom and grant us courage until thoughts of destroying one another give way to deeds of embracing each other; until our policies prove our promise of equal justice under law; until we decide too many have been hurting too long.

Grant us courage until in every way we show in our democratic process that everybody has a right to live; until we lift from the bottom so that everybody rises; until the stones that the builder rejected become the chief cornerstone of a new social reality.

Please, God, grant us wisdom, grant us courage, until the poor are lifted, the sick are healed, children are protected, and civil rights and human rights never neglected. Grant us wisdom for the facing of this hour until love and justice are never rejected.

Grant us wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour until, together, we make sure there is racial justice and economic justice and living-wage justice and health care justice and ecological justice and disability justice and justice for homeless and justice for the poor and low-wealth and working poor and immigrant justice—until we study war no more and peace and justice are the way we live.

—Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, Inaugural Prayer Service, January 21, 2021



# SESSION THREE: DISPELLING MYTHS AND TELLING THE WHOLE TRUTH

## (CHAPTERS 5–6)

### SESSION DESCRIPTION

The United States has been profoundly shaped by a series of shared myths and even mistruths regarding the meaning of the nation and its creed. All these myths have propped up the founding myth of white supremacy, which remains a principal fault line in American politics. Building the Beloved Community requires dispelling these myths by telling the whole truth about the United States' past, present, and future.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some ways your life and views have been shaped by the national myths that are named in chapter 5, including the myth of the chosen nation, a Christian nation, and an innocent nation? Can you recall specific moments, events, or conversations that made you aware that these were more myths than reality? Can you point to times when you have been guilty of behavior that reflects conscious or unconscious belief in one or more of these myths? Do you see ways to redeem any of these myths?
2. What was your exposure to the 1619 Project prior to reading this book? What had you heard about it, and in what contexts? Have you encountered any other efforts, whether named in these chapters or not, to give a more truthful account of the United States' history and present-day society? If so, what was the context? How did you react? Can you give any examples of things you never knew until encountering one or more of these efforts?
3. Can you give any examples in your own life where you sought and/or discovered truths about yourself, your family, your friends, or your society? What happened? Have you ever had an experience where learning the truth was liberating? Are there any truths you think the majority of your community or church is unaware of that they should be aware of? How do you think you could help to open their eyes to these truths?

### VIDEO CLIPS

- ▶ [Richard T. Hughes, Myths America Lives By, Rob Kall Bottom-up Show](#) (full video is 56m6s; recommend watching from the beginning up to 7m57s)
- ▶ [Morning Edition, NPR, "Mass Deportation May Sound Unlikely, but It's Happened Before"](#) (audio only, 3m39s)
- ▶ [PBS NewsHour, "The 1619 Project details the legacy of slavery in America"](#) (14m45s)

### SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

John 8:31-32  
2 Timothy 4:1-4  
Acts 9:1-22

## **PRAYER**

Holy One, Creator of all that is, seen and unseen,  
of story and of song, of heartbeat and of tears  
of bodies, souls, voices and all relations:  
you are the God of all truth and the way of all  
reconciliation.

Uphold with your love and compassion all who open their lives  
in the sacred sharing of their stories  
breathe in us the grace to trust in your loving forgiveness,  
that we may face our histories with courage;  
touch us through the holy gift of story  
that those who speak and those who listen may  
behold your own redeeming presence;  
guide us with holy wisdom to enter through the gates of remorse  
that our feet may walk gently and firmly on the way of justice  
and healing.  
Amen.

—From the Anglican Church of Canada



# SESSION FOUR: POLARIZATION, PARTISANSHIP, AND PATRIOTISM

(CHAPTERS 7–8)




## SESSION DESCRIPTION

Polarization—so often driven by cynicism, anger, self-righteousness, contempt, and vitriol—has poisoned our cultural and political discourse. It has become one of the greatest threats both to a more perfect union and to building the Beloved Community. But polarization is not inevitable, and it can be reversed. Repenting for our failures to live up to our nation's ideals and promises allows us to create more authentic space for that more perfect union to be realized, even as we celebrate the ideals that make America worth loving and honoring. Redeeming patriotism requires reframing our love for the best of America's ideals and aspirations. It requires understanding that the right to critique America is part of the brilliance of America.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you lost friendships or relationships with family members due to political differences? If so, would you be willing to share with your group what happened and why? Have you ever successfully mended a relationship damaged by opposing political views? If so, how did that come about, and what, if anything, did you learn from the experience?
2. Can you share any examples of friendships or relationships that you've formed or maintained across significant political or other differences? Can you give an example of something valuable and/or profound that you learned through such relationships? What have you experienced as the biggest challenges to forming and maintaining relationships of this kind?
3. Have you heard of the neuroscience trends that so often drive polarization (such as meta-perception, motive attribution asymmetry, sacred values, and the halo effect)? Which of these brain functions do you think are fueling polarization the most? How do you think we can best overcome them?
4. How much had you heard about Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the National Anthem prior to reading this book? What were your views on it? Have those views changed since you first heard about it? If so, what changed your perspective?
5. Do you consider yourself patriotic? Why or why not, and in what ways? How do you think you can best resist the temptation of destructive nationalism and instead help redeem patriotism?

## VIDEO CLIPS

-  [Carnegie Endowment, "Should the U.S. Worry about Political Violence in 2020 Elections?"](#) (Panel featuring Rachel Kleinfeld) (3m12s)
-  [The One America Movement, "We have a choice to make"](#) (4m0s)
-  [NewsOne Now Exclusive: Harry Belafonte Weighs In on Kaepernick National Anthem Protest Controversy](#) (6m50s)

## SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Romans 12:1-21  
James 2:14-22  
Amos 5:24

## PRAYER

God of all humanity,  
You call us to bring about healing and wholeness for the whole world—  
for women and men of all races and cultures and creeds.  
Help us to respond to a world that is groaning under the weight  
of injustice and broken relationships.  
Remind us that differences are a gift,  
and interdependence a strength from the same creative God.  
Strengthen us to resist the forces that encourage polarization and competition  
rather than understanding and cooperation.  
We know that your reign is not built on injustice and oppression,  
but on the transformation of hearts—  
new life, not just reordered life.  
Teach us forgiveness, O God.  
Bring us reconciliation.  
Give us hope for the future.  
We pray in Jesus' love.  
Amen.

—Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, in *Seeing the Face of God in Each Other:  
The Antiracism Training Manual of The Episcopal Church*

# SESSION FIVE: BEATITUDES, PART ONE:

## EQUALITY AND WELCOME

(CHAPTERS 9–10)




### SESSION DESCRIPTION

Foundational to the Beloved Community is a newfound understanding of what equality means and a commitment to radical welcome. Essential to building the Beloved Community is cocreating a nation in which neither privilege nor punishment is tied to race, ethnicity, gender, religious belief, or sexual orientation. While a high bar, this goal helps us to actualize and make real America's creed for all Americans. Radical welcome is a commitment rooted in an injunction found throughout the Hebrew Bible to welcome and show love toward the migrant, often referred to in Scripture as the stranger. This commitment is also echoed in the gospel teachings of Jesus and is captured in the symbolism and history behind the Statue of Liberty to provide refuge to the most downtrodden and oppressed.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you answer the question the Ferguson activists asked Adam Taylor and other faith leaders: "How much are you willing to sacrifice so that everyone can experience true freedom and justice?" Think about as many different dimensions and implications of that question as you can. For example, how might this question manifest in the realms of taxation, city planning, education, criminal justice, and much more? What privileges do you carry by virtue of your social location, and how do they show up in your day-to-day life? What have you already sacrificed willingly, and where do you see room for growth?
2. How do you think about policing and public safety? What has your relationship and experience been with police throughout your life? Which of the ideas for reform and/or transformation of policing and public safety discussed in chapter 9 most resonate with you? Are there any you disagree with, and if so, why? Or would you go even further than what Adam advocates?
3. What does the concept of radical welcome look like in your life, your family, your church, and your community? How have you been welcomed throughout your life, and how have those experiences shaped your thinking and values?

### VIDEO CLIPS

-  [Sojourners, "Stewards with Responsibilities" \(Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Brooks\)](#) (9m59s)
-  [Sojourners, "M25 Documentary—Sanctuary"](#) (full video is 26m4s; recommend watching from 14m17 to the end)
-  [Sojourners, "We Are Here: Refugee Storytellers—Basma Alawee"](#) (2m54s)

### SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Genesis 1:26-27  
Isaiah 58:6-12  
Luke 10:25-37  
Hebrews 13:2

## **PRAYER**

Blessed are you, Lord Jesus Christ. You crossed every border between divinity and humanity to make your home with us. Help us to welcome you in newcomers, migrants, and refugees. Blessed are you, God of all nations. You bless our land richly with goods of creation and with people made in your image. Help us to be good stewards and peacemakers who live as your children. Blessed are you, Holy Spirit. You work in the hearts of all to bring about harmony and goodwill. Strengthen us to welcome those from other lands, cultures, religions, that we may live in human solidarity and in hope. God of all people, grant us vision to see your presence in our midst, especially in our immigrant sisters and brothers. Give us courage to open the door to our neighbors and grace to build a society of justice.

—Pax Christi, in “Collected Prayers for Immigrants,” compiled by Interfaith Worker Justice

# SESSION SIX: BEATITUDES, PART TWO: INTERDEPENDENCE AND NONVIOLENCE

(CHAPTERS 11–12)




## SESSION DESCRIPTION

Archbishop Desmond Tutu summarizes the African concept of *ubuntu* like this: “I am because we are.” Personal, societal, and global interdependence lies at the heart of what binds us together and constitutes an essential component of building the Beloved Community. Our interdependence, common humanity, and the image of God in each of us lie at the heart of the Beloved Community’s commitment to and dependence on prioritizing nonviolence.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has COVID-19 affected your life, family, and community since early 2020? How has it changed you in small or large ways? What do you think COVID-19 has revealed about our communities and society?
2. How does the concept of *ubuntu* relate to the way you think about the kind of community, nation, and world we want to build as we come through and get beyond the pandemic? Think in terms of causes, problems, opportunities, dilemmas, solutions, etc. Think interpersonally, locally, and globally.
3. Talk about a time when you were challenged to love an enemy and/or to forgive someone who had hurt you deeply. Did the experience ultimately affirm or challenge the way you previously thought about nonviolence, forgiveness, and your faith? In what ways? Did it change the way you approached issues or situations that happened to you later? Why or why not?
4. What do you see as the greatest advantages and opportunities for the holistic, comprehensive approach outlined in chapter 11 to fighting poverty? Do you see any drawbacks or challenges to this approach? If so, how would you approach overcoming those drawbacks and/or challenges? What is your own sense of the best ways to work toward ending poverty? How does your life experience inform your thinking about poverty, its causes, and its solutions?

## VIDEO CLIPS

-  [Desmond Tutu, “We Are Human Only through Relationships: Ubuntu”](#) (2m59s)
-  [PBS NewsHour, “Poor People’s Campaign asks America to face the injustices keeping millions in poverty”](#) (9m49s)
-  [CNN, “Victims’ relatives forgive, urge shooter to repent”](#) (1m46s)

## SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

1 Corinthians 12:12-26  
Matthew 5:1-12, 38-48  
Matthew 18:21-22

## **PRAYER**

O God, all holy one, you are our Mother and our Father  
and we are your children.  
Open our eyes and our hearts  
so that we may be able to discern your work in the universe  
and be able to see Your features in every one of Your children.  
May we learn that there are many paths but all lead to You.  
Help us to know that you have created us for family,  
for togetherness, for peace, for gentleness, for compassion,  
for caring, for sharing.  
May we know that You want us to care for one another  
as those who know that they are sisters and brothers, siblings,  
members of the same family, Your family, the human family.  
Help us to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks,  
so that we may be able to live in peace and harmony,  
wiping away the tears from the eyes of those who are less fortunate than ourselves.  
And may we know war no more,  
as we strive to be what You want us to be: Your children. Amen.

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu

# SESSION SEVEN: BEATITUDES, PART THREE: ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AND DIGNITY

(CHAPTERS 13–14)

## SESSION DESCRIPTION

Environmental stewardship is the belief that God gave human beings a special responsibility to care for creation, guard it, and use it wisely. With the increasing impacts and growing threat of climate change as well as other forms of environmental destruction, a greater embrace of stewardship of the earth has become both a faith imperative and a political priority that is fundamental to building the Beloved Community. Combined with a belief in the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, we can arrive at a vision for a global Beloved Community that uses the best practices of sustainable development to prioritize both care for the earth and human flourishing.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS




1. What are the ways you have been personally affected by climate change? What about environmental injustice? How does your thinking about both climate change and environmental justice affect your lifestyle and your politics in small and large ways? If you had to rank the biggest issues facing the country, what would be on your list, and where would climate change fall? Why?
2. Do you see any tension or contradiction between the moral imperative to end extreme poverty all over the world and the need to combat climate change? Why or why not? Do you agree with the way the author navigates the connections between these issues? Why or why not?
3. Given the urgency and robust scientific consensus, how do you perceive the US government's approach to combating climate change and promoting sustainable development? What is the United States not doing that it should be doing, and what is the United States doing that it should stop doing? In your own personal life, what are you committed to doing more or less of to practice environmental stewardship?

## PRAYER

God of all creation, your goodness and glory shine forth through everything you have made. Through the light of faith, help us to see this world, our common home, not as a resource to dominate and exploit, but as a gift to be cherished by all generations. Prompted by your Spirit, we ask this in the name of Jesus, through whom all creation was made. Amen.

—Catholic Charities USA

## VIDEO CLIPS

-  [Sojourners, “Die-In Protest Calls for Action against Climate Change”](#) (2m0s)
-  [C4C Special Jury Prize, “The World Has Malaria” by Max Thabiso Edkins](#) (1m0s)
-  [Sustainability Illustrated, “Sustainable Development Goals explained with 3 useful tips”](#) (full video is 6m47s; recommend watching the first 5 minutes)

## SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Genesis 1:1-26  
Leviticus 25:18-24  
Isaiah 65:17-23



# SESSION EIGHT: BEATITUDES,

## PART FOUR: DEMOCRACY

### (CHAPTER 15 AND EPILOGUE)

#### SESSION DESCRIPTION

The road to a more perfect union has been long and uneven. There is no path there without progress in becoming a more perfect democracy. America's democratic system is damaged, often undermined, frequently in question, but not beyond repair. Protecting the right to vote affirms the divine image and inherent value of all God's children. Ultimately, the road to a radically more inclusive and just America and world has been and will continue to be a long and arduous one. But if we walk it together—tapping into God's limitless grace and strength, knowing by faith that ultimately the race has already been won, and thus that nothing is impossible—the Beloved Community will prevail.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your perspective on the various democracy reform proposals that have been discussed in recent years, including those mentioned in these chapters (for example, DC statehood, reforming or abolishing the filibuster, abolishing the electoral college, expanding and/or otherwise reforming the Supreme Court, reforming congressional redistricting, making changes to voting laws, etc.)? Are there any you see as particularly important? Are there any you don't support?
2. How would you answer Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s question "Where do we go from here?" How has this book changed your perspective on what needs to happen and/or what will happen in the months and years to come? What do you feel most called and/or inspired to do?
3. How has your understanding of the term "Beloved Community" changed after reading this book? In what ways are you most committed to building the Beloved Community in the days and years ahead?

#### VIDEO CLIPS



[Sojourners, "Resisting Voter Suppression" \(Lawyers and Collars launch video\) \(3m30s\)](#)



[Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here? \(Conclusion\)" \(audio only, 16m25s\)](#)

#### SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Isaiah 10:1-4  
Romans 13:1-10  
Micah 6:8

#### PRAYER

O God, all people are your beloved,  
across races, nationalities, religions, sexual orientations,  
and all the ways we are distinctive from one another.  
We are all manifestations of your image.  
We are bound together in an inescapable network of  
mutuality  
and tied to a single garment of destiny.

You call us into your unending work  
of justice, peace, and love.  
Let us know your presence among us now:  
Let us delight in our diversity  
that offers glimpses of the mosaic of your beauty.  
Strengthen us with your steadfast love and  
transform our despairing fatigue into hope-filled action.

—Adapted from United Church of Christ Invocation for Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend