



I think we all realize the pains of 2020 will carry over into at least some of the coming year. Even so, I am glad to see this year come to a close and have great hopes for 2021. With a new year, comes a new theme I want to introduce before we actually get to January 1. Maybe I want the new year to hurry up and get here, but more than that, I would like for all of us to begin thinking about how this theme might impact our family of faith and those in our city and beyond. The phrase 'BELOVED COMMUNITY' is not original to me, but something I have been studying for several years, all the way back to 1999 when I began seriously reading and examining the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. The pinnacle of my MLK Jr studies was my dissertation completed in 2013 as I wrote about how King understood the identity and work of the church. Without going into detail here, the crux of King's ecclesiology boils down to his beliefs about how Christians are to create a 'beloved community' in Christ that manifests the love of God in a hostile world.

The centerpiece for this theme is from the Gospel of John 13:1-17 as Jesus washes the disciples' feet. For me, this powerful story demonstrates the heart of beloved community and what it takes to create and sustain it. The sacrificial spirit, humility, service, care, work and love – the symbolism of the towel, basin, water, cleanliness, Jesus bowed down, the timeframe of being so close to the crucifixion – all of this and much more will help us understand what it takes to build a community of love that serves, proclaims the Gospel, makes disciples and ultimately could heal the world. A community built on love – love of God and neighbor – that demonstrates its love in tangible ways through acts of justice, mercy and humility can heal wounds, bridge divides, give hope and fulfill our purpose of bringing God's Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven.

I am optimistic that FBC can embody this theme in the coming year in an even deeper and more meaningful way than we already do. So let's start the discussion – in our Bible studies, small groups, committees, advisory teams, in our deacon body, in the hallways (when we are able!),

through our worship experiences, in our missions, spiritual formation, with our youth and children, in our Zoom meetings – wherever we can – even with our neighbors, friends, co-workers, family and strangers. We start with the question of what does it mean to incarnate a beloved community of Christ? We can also start with John 13 and ask that same question as it pertains to the passage.

I said the following in 2019 when I discussed the theme of 2020, CONNECT-GROW-SERVE: *These themes are not a gimmick for me. They are what I believe to be essential and structural principles for what it means to be a healthy church.* In my tenure as FBC Pastor, I will continually draw from every yearly theme. You've not heard the end of CONNECT-GROW-SERVE, and after 2021, you will continue to hear about creating and sustaining a beloved community in Christ. My prayer is that we pray earnestly about these ideas and faithfully work to manifest their virtue. For those seeking the identity, values, mission and vision of FBC, my prayer is these themes will bring clarity. We can't be just listeners; the themes can't be just promotional materials or PR. We must put feet to our faith and provide substance to theories. The good news is that we already do in so many ways – but these commitments must be renewed all the time. Creativity and improvements are needed. Financial support, volunteer support and new members are also needed. There is work to do. I believe we are the people to do it. Are you ready?

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