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The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today

Charles Marsh

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Speaking to his supporters at the end of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr.- then a young minister only two years out of divinity school - declared that their common goal was not simply the end of segregation as an institution. Rather, “the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community.” King’s words reflect the strong religious impetus behind the civil rights movement in the South in its early days. Consciously emphasizing the Judeo-Christian roots of their convictions, civil rights leaders at the time saw their ultimate purpose as building a “beloved community” on earth. In their quest for social justice, the radical idea of Christian love, specifically through the practice of nonviolence, would transform the social and political realities of twentieth-century America. By the end of the 1960s, that exuberant vision of the beloved community had come apart, lost to disillusionment and secular radicalism. But as noted theologian Charles Marsh shows, the same spiritual vision that animated the civil rights movement remains a vital-and growing-source of moral energy today. In moving prose, Marsh traces the history of this vision over the past four decades, from the racial reconciliation movement in American cities to the intentional communities that church groups have founded. His portraits of faith-based social justice initiatives-including Eugene Rivers’ Azusa Christian Community in Boston and Koinonia Farm in Georgia-offer a stark contrast to the usual media portrayal of Christian activism. Despite the odds against it, the pursuit of the beloved community continues to foster racial unity and civic responsibility in a divided American culture. With *The Beloved Community*, Marsh lays out a exuberant new vision for Christian progressivism, and simultaneously reclaims the centrality of faith in the quest for social justice.

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