

Draft Statement before film clip: Before our main text is shared, we feel it abundantly important to name that the audio clip accompanied by captions is of Toni Morrison herself reading a portion of *Beloved*. This is a content warning and naming that Toni Morrison's text is a sacred Black text centering the grave injustices against Black and brown siblings. The intent of dialoguing with Morrison's text and Psalm 139 is to call careful attention to the dangers of the clearing in hopes that collectively in our work of belonging we can cultivate a non-violent clearing of flourishing where our truths, personhood and experiences within the imago dei's heart is honored, acknowledged and fought for its thriving.

Sermon

This is a sermon that almost didn't happen. A deep wrestling with how to be human and loving in an intersectional approach - hard work; useful work; creation care soil bearing; need to not wear my shoes today kind of work. Because this place, Columbia Theological Seminary is holy and this soil needs tending.

It needs to be said before we really spend time in *this here place*, that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and this sermon we just heard from Baby Suggs is a sacred Black Queer text. Elevated today, and hopefully to grow roots in all of ours souls for the days to come, Morrison's *Beloved* has been and is a text that Black and Queer people find mirroring, when Psalm 139 no longer touches the imago dei imprint. A balm and a call to remember who we are and who God made us to become.

Morrison's text is a sacred Black text first and foremost of the grave injustices against our Black and brown siblings in the form of enslavement. An enslavement that *Beloved* teaches us, that plunders the mind, body and soul of its freedom. And in this here place, that has to be named. Morrison shared in an interview I watched while preparing for this sermon, that *Beloved* requires us to go to the clearing, the uncomfortable, to bear witness to its truth and do something about it.

My hope is that you'll join me today, in this here place, for the uncomfortable, the remembering and the action toward liberation.

Before Baby Suggs utters that prophetic sermon on the mount of the clearing, she gives a set of instructions - a ritual, really - to re-embody the truth of belovedness. She asks those gathered to laugh, dance, and cry. The collective begins to do just that to the point that

they all rest on the ground of renewal; creation soil. M Shawn Copeland, an incredible Black Womanist Theologian, shares that this moment is “a vivid and powerful re-ordering of creation.”

Beloved narrates, *the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they could not have it.*

My life as a queer person has been full of survivorship. Begging and pleading for entry into infrastructures and church pews that do not honor my personhood. In these here spaces, churches, seminaries, bible study groups, and the lingering of bodies post worship can become violent spaces for queer people. And, truthfully told, not just become - but have been violent. Violent for me in specific ways and through shared narratives with me, even more violent for Black queer colleagues. My experience is my own as a white queer person. But the ethos of queer community, for me, and the ethos of hopefully what our psalm texts invites us to be aware of, is the imago dei is incomplete without the life and personhood of Black and brown queer community members as well. Liberation and healing begins with restoring the oppressed’s image of themselves as being knit in the image and likeness of God

If all the imago dei within queer community receives is a tarnished and pushed to the margin treatment, then the hold on grace becomes cheap, as Bonhoeffer puts, and I at least, begin to draw weary and retreat to the wilderness that heteronormativity banished me too.

If these sentiments of banishment sound familiar to you, you’re not alone. Fighting for scraps at a table that was definitely intended for the margins is exhausting. Christ’s body is broken over and over and over again at the sacred table and yet the crumbs continue to be the only pieces available. How many times must Christ touch their wounds and those of the oppressed to showcase, “this is my body broken for you...” do no more breaking... but instead tend to wholeness ... how many times does Christ have to die (or ache) before we honor God’s ask of us to be stewards of love?

What does it mean to be whole in a world that inacts anti-trans laws, overturns abortion health care, disembodies Black and brown people, disenfranchizes queer people, lies about

white supremacy, doesn't say the countless names of Black trans women who have lost their lives to violence and destroys the clearings we come to remember who we are and belong?

We need a wider clearing. One that is not created by colonization, tokenism, racism, white supremacy or death. We need to reclaim the clearing and then we need to work together to ensure the clearing leads to a non-violent path to flourishing. In actuality, we need the clearing to become a place where the queer bodies of the margins get to frolic in freedom from spaces where society tells our queer bodies to hide.

I lose sleep and exhaust myself over the truth that some queer people - across all intersections - may never get to see the clearing. They might die in the forest. Physical, mental or spiritual deaths that no one gets to hear or name or sit with... isolated and alone. Baby Suggs was worried about this too. She stood in a wide open clearing prophetically declaring to love oneself fully, unapologetically - knowing that if caught, it could lead to her death.

Some of us may know the feeling of the wide open clearing being dangerous. Today is national coming out day and the wide open clearing should be a place where our queer and trans siblings can stand proudly to profess love for self and personhood before God and humanity. Unapologetically queer. Unapologetically human. Unapologetically a child of God.

But, the clearing isn't safe. Trans kids are facing laws that tell them the same truth of Baby Suggs sermon, "they do not love your flesh..they do not love your eyes... they do not love your hands." We need to wrestle with the clearing. We need to wrestle with the violence against Black trans women and the injustice of their stories that are often silenced. We need to wrestle with the ways queer people are tokenized to teach the marjoity about pronouns and why we have such days as national coming out day... when collectively our community knows.. It's because many do not make it to their coming out celebration... they get lost in the violent clearing of denial and disembodiment. We need to tend the soil. We need a new clearing; a new vision.

Because, as Andre Henry shares in his work often, *it doesn't have to be this way.*

I want to see all of us make it *past* the clearing. I want a world where the clearing isn't needed to be remembered to be re-embodied. Where collectively, none of us are scared to be uncomfortable and to lean into the truth of our exclusionary history. To be bold in our actions and commitments of belonging and inclusion. To center Black, brown and queer bodies. And to challenge anything that gets in the way of any human person not believing or having the grace to know they are indeed made in the image and likeness of God; beloved - *beloved*.

Psalms 139 says, "you knit me together." The tender nature of our soft God took time on us. Took delicate, tender care on us. Placed hands on us, feet on us, mouths on us, eyes on us, desires in us - God knit us together. And, God desires us to be knitted together. Knitted together by being seen. Knitted together by being cared for. Knitted together by having the margin move to the center. Knitted together by recognizing and acknowledging who's missing and who needs to be here.

I can't preach this sermon alone. I won't even pretend like I can. My experience does not encompass the sum of the soil we stand on. But I can ask for the collective to confront hard truths, hold and maintain awareness, lament and co-collaborate in restoring the full complexity of the imago dei with beloved;belonging community.

Are you with me in this clearing moment?

Because I know the ways of doubt, and truth be told, it's a hell of a lot easier to walk out of this room today and forget about this clearing we are sitting in. It's easier to say, "we belong" than to act and reform our intentions toward the imago dei of belonging. It's easier to call ourselves allies than to step aside and be more than even that word - a co-conspirator.

We have a world around us that makes it easy to say no to hard work. No to fierce love. No to bold justice. No to constant work in decentering and disbanding structures of supremacy.

And, yet I come to the clearing today humbly and I hold the truth of this soil in my fingers and between my toes and remember HALA's chapel service a few weeks ago.

This is God's garden and we are the gardener's of our beloved community. So, who will tend it?

There are responsibilities for each of us: To pull weeds often. To till the soil. To water the seeds. To harvest and equitably distribute. Not just once or every 7 years in our imagination of Jubilee. But often and always. To place flowers in vases and tell the truth of how they grew and what they endured. To pat them carefully, dry and frame their truths in history and telling, so we may never forget their efforts, their suffering, their beauty.

We have an opportunity, friends, to reclaim the clearing here at Columbia that will shape us for our futures ahead - no matter where those calls take us. No matter if we are PCUSA, UCC, Baptist, AME, Pentacostal, spiritual wanderers or more. Our futures ahead are determined by the work we do now.

To move forward in belonging, we must continue to name the past. To move forward in belonging, we must look to this moment and not to the desires of the future so that we may taste milk and honey later. To move forward in belonging, we truly must love ourselves, our collective body and commit to widening the clearing. Name when we have wronged one another. Sit in the uncomfortable truths. Listen to each other even when it is difficult. Share our stories and fears. Prioritize and center Black, brown, hispanic, international and queer voices constantly - not as a means of checking a box - but as a means of honoring Christ's call to us at the dinner table... I've broken my body so that you may be whole....

Are you tired of the clearing's consuming nature?

To remember can be painful especially when we reflect on ways we may have lingered from our creation soil. The beauty of the moment where M Shawn Copeland speaks to the re-ordering of creation in *Beloved*, for me, shares that the soil when it is tended to carefully, lovingly and honestly - not erased, nor removed but held - can grow belonging over hatred and destruction.

Something profoundly beautiful about God forming our being from the soil is the very life-giving serotonin found in soil itself when smelled. Soil sees so much, remembers so much and also can still be reordered; reunited with God's life force.

Our soil is here, how will we tend to it?

When faculty listens to our voices when we share harm and questions of, "what now?" The clearing gets wider. When SGA continues to work diligently to hear our collective voice and share with the board of trustees, president and faculty. The clearing gets wider. When we sit at tables we have neglected and listen. The clearing gets wider. When we create policies that protect and fully acknowledge LGBTQ+ students and uphold them. The clearing gets wider. When we step into the clearing that is dangerous for Black, brown and queer siblings to protect and walk with one another in a co-conspirator commitment. The clearing becomes liberated.

If this sounds like life long work, then you've arrived. Beloved, the clearing isn't for the faint of heart. But it is a place we need to stand with one another to ensure transformation, care, celebration, love and wholeness.

The good news here is we are in the process of belonging. We are in the process of beloved community. We are in the midst of a turning point moment.

And, God, give us the grace to repeat and believe your truth, "I am wonderfully made" and mirror it to each other authentically.

We love a God who has searched us, known us and will not abandon us in the work of belonging and wholeness. This truth for me has kept my queer non binary trans self alive.

Let this be a truth that you hold as we do hard, needed work, care work, growth work, soil tending, clearing widening work to be the people of God; in kinship that our creator breathed into our being.

May we not shy away from loving our neighbor and loving God in word and action in this here place.

May we not shy away from hard truths - that the road to belonging is messy. May we not shy away from bearing witness to the imago dei in each of us. The divine in each of us. May we in the face of a world that begs for us to separate the body; plant more nourishment. Hold ourselves tenderly and honestly.

May we practice the tenants and sacred ritual of Beloved spoken from Morrison.

Let us go to the clearing - often.

Let us sit in the uncomfortable - often.

Let us bear witness to its truth - often.

And beloved, let us do something about the injustices unfolding around us.

Because we are knit together; we inherently belong to the call to widen the clearing.

Let us in word, action and, most of all love, be the beloved community God desires and planted within us at our creation.

Amen.

Call to Transformation:

We cannot plant new seeds without touching our life force and remembering the intent of it to flourish. And we cannot plant new seeds without the honoring of those who have been denied the ability to touch their life force with tender care and love. So, in closing and in fostering, we add nourishment to the soil, we touch the soil and we plant grass seeds to cover the barren dry land as a symbol of our commitment to transformative belonging that honors, acknowledges & fights for justice of the imago dei's heart... for that is the prize. ...Come as you are able to place seeds into this soil ...