

**PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2009 (EPIPHANY VII)
THE REV. JOHN TAMILIO III**

**SERMON TITLE: “Remember, Celebrate, Hope”
SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Mark 1:29-39**

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When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a rock star. I used to listen to Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend, and Mark Knopfler. These are the guitarists I emulated. I wanted to be in a famous band like The Who, Pink Floyd, or Thin Lizzy. Yes, I did like Elton John, David Bowie, and Queen...but never in a million years did I imagine that I would be standing in front of a group of people (be it with a guitar in my hand or a Bible) wearing a bright, red suit! In fact, if you told me back then that I would be standing in a pulpit dressed this way, I would have cried, because I would have assumed that I was going to be a TV evangelist. *What a sense of humor our still speaking God has, no?*

I never realized that the “seduced by Satan” comment that I received via e-mail would have such drastic effects! One of the other negative comments I received claimed that “Pilgrim UCC must be some sort of cult.” Now if you are a visitor to Pilgrim today...you may have the same impression. I assure you: our worship services (the other 51 Sundays of the year) are actually pretty traditional and, despite the red suit, I am often described (theologically) as Neo-Orthodox. *You wouldn't know that today, would you?*

Today is Mardi Gras — the last Sunday before we kick off the season of Lent. Mardi Gras is French for “Fat Tuesday.” From Europe, to Rio de Janeiro, to Slovenia, to Mexico, to New Orleans, this is a carnival celebration — the final “Alleluia” before we trod the penitent road that is Lent.

Today is another type of celebration for Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ. This is the day that we kick-off a year-long party: our 150th birthday!

Pilgrim is 150 years old! We are embarking on a time to *Remember, Celebrate, and Hope*. Another way to frame this is to say, we will spend the next ten months commemorating where we have been, rejoicing over where we are now, and envisioning where we want to be 150 years from now. *Remember, Celebrate, Hope*.

Remember. Many of you know the Pilgrim story. Pilgrim was founded on the theological principles of the Social Gospel Movement: an intellectual development in the latter part of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century that employed Christian ethics to address a plethora of social problems including poverty, racism, child labor, and the threat of war. Pilgrim was also founded on the belief the quality education is pertinent for the betterment of society. A congregation that quickly became the center for community activity in the Tremont neighborhood, Pilgrim stressed the importance of the arts, which we incorporated into our worship and programming.

Not much has changed in 150 years.

Pilgrim is still guided by the tenets of the Social Gospel Movement. One only need look as far as our Bradley Fund, Food Pantry, and Interfaith Hospitality Network; our declarations of being both an Open and Affirming and a Just-Peace congregation; and our denominational programs that call for Sacred Conversations on Race and a cry for justice in Darfur, Sudan to see that we seek to serve God in the service of all people — particularly those who have been segregated to the margins of society. And speaking of the arts, Pilgrim is the home to the Antaeus Dance Company, Arts Renaissance Tremont, and we are a regular participant in the Tremont Art Walk.

Caring for all people, offering community programming, and being a haven for the arts is part of our history as well as our contemporary life.

Speaking of our contemporary life, we also gather today to **Celebrate** who we are today as a church. This is a tough time for *all* non-profit organizations. The current financial crisis has posed a serious challenge to churches of all sizes in all denominations. I can say with pride and humility, though, that Pilgrim is indeed *Alive* and it is a healthy congregation.

Pilgrim continues to be a church that embodies the mantra of the United Church of Christ's "God is Still Speaking" campaign and the more recent Congregational Vitality Initiative. This is a church where all are welcome. It does not matter who you are. It does not matter what baggage you bring with you from your past. It does not matter if others have told you that you cannot belong to their faith community, because you do not conform to whatever bogus sociological standards they have set. It does not matter if you agree with every word or phrase in the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith. It does not matter if you are rich or poor, black or white, gay or straight, fully employed or someone desperately searching for a job. Membership in our church comes with very few stipulations. I recently heard someone remark, "You know that United Church of Christ...they'll take anybody!" That's right; we will! As one of the still speaking slogans declared, "Jesus didn't turn people away...neither do we."

Pilgrim was founded upon these principles. Today, we celebrate that aspect of our identity — along with being a church that continues to serve all people in the service of God. Dick Berlow continues to ensure that our food pantry remains open. The Bradley Fund still gives people a fish while teaching them how to fish. We continue to house the Interfaith Hospitality Network and we welcomed over 800 people into our building a few weeks ago as part of the Homeless Stand Down. At Pilgrim, worship and service go hand-in-hand. They always have and always will.

We also gather today to Hope. In one of my poems, I wrote:

To approach the dry abyss of memory
without an eye on tomorrow
is to search only for dust and stone.¹

In other words, if we only live in the past, we become inert. If, however, we look to the past for inspiration — if we discern how our heritage informs our present and future actions — then we give true honor to all those who passed this legacy onto us.

¹ John Tamilio III, "February's Child" from *Blind Painting: Poems* (Dublin, New Hampshire: William L. Bauhan Publishers, Inc., 2003), 19.

Our 150 year celebration is also a time to hope. What are your hopes for Pilgrim? What church will we leave to our children?

My hope is that regardless of what value-laden message (or lack thereof) that the secular realm continues to impose on the general populace, that we will be guided by the light of Christ's Gospel: a Gospel of truth and reconciliation. My hope is that we not only remain a church rooted in the principles of Just-Peace and Open and Affirming, but that we continue to make local, national, and even global change based on this ethic. It is pertinent (from a faith perspective) to let our politicians and law makers know that *all people* deserve the same rights as a fundamental part of their humanity. It is important to hold news media, such as *The New York Post*, accountable when they publish editorial cartoons that perpetuate racist stereotypes. It is important to let the corporate world know that they cannot treat the environment like a cesspool while their "consumerist serfs" seek to save it through recycling. It is important to let the CEOs and brokers on Wall Street know that it is unconscionable to knowingly engage in corporate scandals that send the country into recession and hard working Americans to the unemployment line. It is important to let our global leaders know that war is an archaic means of conflict resolution and that those who suffer most from armed conflict are the innocent bystanders. It is important for all of us to be more conscious of the fact that it is not enough for us to pray for the homeless and hungry in our community and halfway across the world when we return to our warm homes and fill our bellies; we need to be the voice for the voiceless and advocate for all who oppressed by the sundry of inequalities that make the rich wealthier and the poor more destitute.

This is the church that I want to leave to my children. This is the hope I have for the world, which is embodied in the worship and outreach of Pilgrim Alive. Ultimately, that is why I chose to travel 800 miles from Kansas City to be your new Senior Pastor.

Let me close with the quote that concludes the Lenten Devotional that Rev. Mary Joseph from Pilgrim South wrote for the March 2nd. "The following prayer," Mary writes, comes "from a 1992 Lenten service at Bloor Street United Church in Toronto..."

Life giving God, may we find seeds of life and hope within ourselves, and may we have the courage to scatter those seeds through our life and work. Bless our seeds, loving God, as we plant dreams and hopes in the gardens of our lives and our community. We give thanks for rebirth and resurrection.²

Today, as we *Remember, Celebrate, and Hope* with an open casket before us, we celebrate the power of the resurrection among us — the power that has sustained us during these last 150 years of good times (and not so good times)...the power that will lead us into God’s future of infinite possibility. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Rev. Mary Joseph (Pilgrim South), “In the Bulb There is a Flower...” from the Lent 2009 *Remember, Celebrate, Hope* booklet (Cleveland: Pilgrim Congregational United Church of Christ, 2009), 6.