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PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL UCC
SUNDAY, JULY 19, 2009 (PENTECOST VII)**

**SERMON TITLE: “Imagine”
SCRIPTURE LESSON: Ephesians 2:11-22**

Have you ever been to a party where you didn't know a soul? Well, maybe you knew the person you came with, but he (or she) starting reminiscing with old friends and you were soon left to your own devices. You tried starting a conversation with others, but you can only talk about the weather so much. That gets old fast. The night drags on. You feel as if you are dressed in clothes that don't fit. Once the evening ends, you head home. You grab something cool to drink, flip on the TV to watch an old friend, like David Letterman, and you vow never, *ever* to be in a situation like that again.

Let's face it, being the odd man (or woman) out stinks. Going to a party where you do not know anyone isn't much of a party. For most of us, it is about as much fun as dental work.

What happens in situations like these is that two groups quickly form: those on the inside and those on the outside who try to move into the other group, the inner circle. Often times, to maintain their identity, the inside group keeps those on the outside at arm's length. It gives them a false sense of security. This is not just the case at parties, where the behavior is more subconscious. This behavior occurs in social, political, and religious circles, too, where the behavior is more deliberate and insidious. “You do not belong here, because you are different.”

I am not just talking about etiquette here — the social graces endorsed by the Emily Posts of the world. I am talking about blatant exclusion — social segregation that can lead to the elimination of people's rights, ghettoization, or even ethnic cleansing. It's happened before: history is filled with the tortured skeletons of those deemed different. It is happening now: the sands of Darfur, Sudan are stained with the blood of those who do not conform to the ethnic norm. Those who repress just

ideologies create their own, more sinister ones. Those who burn books eventually burn bodies.

Am I being a bit melodramatic? *I don't think so.* There is a reason why we strive to be a place that welcomes all people. It isn't just to be hospitable. It is a mandate that comes from the likes of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, for they knew *all too well* what happens to the marginalized. In Jesus' time, the marginalized were not allowed to be part of the community. They were the outsiders at the party. Actually, they were not even allowed to come to the party. There were restrictions on who could even interact with such people. They were literally cast to the fringes of society.

But Jesus offered a new vision — he showed people what the realm of God *really* looks like. There is no discrimination in the new community that Jesus established. Paul himself said, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”¹ Jesus challenged the conventions of his day — his message was not just to the Jewish community; it involved the Gentiles as well. *Jews and Gentiles together in fellowship? Slaves and masters seeing each other as equals? Men and women in the same religious community?* That's the idea. In Christ, the social distinctions we place on one another no longer exist. In Jesus, we are all equal.

Not much has changed in 2,000 years. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.” To this day, black and white people rarely worship together. There are black churches within practically all denominations and there are white churches. People in the LGBT community often worship in their churches — be they progressive United Church of Christ congregations or Metropolitan Community Churches — and heterosexuals worship in theirs.

In many respects, Pilgrim is the exception.

Yes, there is more diversity that we need to see in our pews, but what we have here is a taste (if you will) of what Christ calls the Church to be — not a melting pot,

¹ Galatians 3:28 (NRSV).

for that discounts the unique aspects of our individual identities. Melting pots create a mush of conformity, rather than a rainbow with distinct hues. Christ wills a tapestry: a beautiful array of people of all socioeconomic classes, races, cultures, sexual orientations, gender identities, abilities, ages, religious traditions, and the like to be part of one family — God’s family. Is that not what Paul is talking about in this morning’s Epistle Lesson? Paul writes,

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

Granted, Paul was writing about two communities that were called to be one: the Jews and the Gentiles, but might we expand his vision? If Paul were here today, what would he say to us about the opposite factions into which we divide ourselves and the exclusive nature of many of our churches? I think it is safe to say that he would not approve. Just like the Ephesians, he would tell us that we are one in Christ — that in Jesus there is no distinction. Can you hear his words to the Galatians in a contemporary context? I can.

There is no longer Protestant or Catholic, Christian or Muslim, there is no longer male or female, gay or straight, American or Iraqi; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

It would even go beyond that. Paul would explain how *everyone* is welcome into the body of Christ. Paul launched the first still speaking campaign. This man, who once persecuted the Church, made it quite clear: there are no distinctions in Christ; everyone is welcome for who they are, not excluded based on who they are not. Reflecting on today’s Epistle Lesson, Boston College Prof. PHEME PERKINS states that Paul is “insisting that cultural and religious divisions are contrary to God’s vision of human salvation.”² What a perfect way of putting it! The divisions that *we* create —

² PHEME PERKINS, “Ephesians” from *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 404.

be they cultural, religious, political, or social — these dichotomous human constructs contradict God’s plan of salvation.

Our task at Pilgrim, which we find written in our covenant and written on our hearts, is to live as accurate a vision as possible of God’s plan of salvation. We create this vision in our life together. We strive for our membership to be as diverse as possible. What we see in our pews is a foretaste of what we will see around Christ’s heavenly table: all races, all cultures, all ages, all genders, all orientations. *But we are not as diverse as we could be.* There are people out there who have been excluded from the church because of their differences who are still looking for a church like ours. It is our job together to reach out to them and welcome them home.

I read through all the cards that people put in the basket last week. They were wonderful. People’s hopes for Pilgrim are very similar: church growth, fiscal security, building maintenance, strong youth programming, and the like. One card struck me in particular. The person wrote:

I hope to make this church better.

I hope to increase the church membership.

Notice the difference? This person is seeking to be part of the solution; he/she is not asking others to do the work of the church. This card is filled with hope and ownership.

I hope to make this church better.

I hope to increase the church membership.

Imagine. Imagine if this was the commitment that every one of our members had? Nothing would stop us! Pilgrim’s membership could grow to 600, 700, 800, 900, even 1000 members. But more important than quantity is quality. We would be more diverse, more hospitable, more welcoming. We would be the multifarious rainbow that we want the world to be — that God wills the world to be. Imagine what that would look like!

It begins here. It begins with worship — but that worship leads us into the world to worship with our lives, to not be satisfied until Pilgrim is filled with every man, woman, and child that the world has rejected. It is then that we can declare to all who come (in the voice of the Apostle), “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” With God’s help, may that be Pilgrim’s future. Amen.