

Good morning!

As I said earlier, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our guests from the Presbyterian Church, we are so blessed to have you with us!

So, this morning begins my sermon series for the month of August.

Each week, I am going to preach on a different sentence from our church's new vision statement.

We adopted it this past February.

It's short, but dense, so for each Sunday in August, I am going to parse out one piece of it.

Today I am going to preach on the commitment we made to, *"Embodying the beloved, diverse community that Jesus modeled for us."*

So that you can understand that phrase in context, here is the vision statement in its entirety:

*At the UCC Burlington, we cultivate a thriving environment, which empowers us to embody the beloved, diverse community that Jesus modeled for us, proclaiming that all are welcome, all are loved.*

*We celebrate our colonial roots as we change, adapt and grow into who God is calling us to be.*

*We respect the sanctity of each person's spiritual journey and we are blessed by the gifts that each person brings to the life of the church.*

*We join together in faithful service and advocacy with the ongoing hope that we can make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone."*

We have been going through a 2-year visioning process in which we've been discerning, together, where God is calling us in the future.

We believe that we are all in a dynamic relationship with God, that is always changing and evolving.

Our church is in a very healthy place, and we wanted to take some time to pause and reflect on where God is calling us to go from here.

We can get so caught up with the day in and day out operations of running a church, as an institution, that we sometimes forget to be the church as a faith community, which is following the will of God.

So, how did we go through this discernment process?

We had many, many, small group conversations, or what we called, 'living room conversations.'

These were opportunities for people to gather together to share their hopes and dreams, what they love and what they loathe about the church.

From all this data, our Visioning Committee identified key recurring themes, and then created a vision statement, which encapsulated those themes.

One thing that bubbled to the surface, from all of these conversations was that we believe we are called to embody the beloved, diverse community that Jesus modeled for us.

So, why do we think that his community was so diverse?

Well, simply put, because it was.

Jesus was an expert at “crossing the railroad tracks,” if you will.

He modeled what it means to be in relationship with people who are different from you.

All over the New Testament we hear Jesus being accused of being a friend to the sinners.

The Scribes and Pharisees chastise him for eating with sinners, the crowds accused him of being a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Luke 7: 34).

What they were really saying was that he was a friend to people who were different from them.

He ministered to people who were different from the traditional Jewish elites.

What Jesus was actually doing was spending time with the common folk, people like you and me.

Imperfect people.

We are the tax collectors, we are the Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus asked for water when the Samaritans shared nothing with the Jews.

We are the crippled beggar, whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath.

We are the rich young ruler who didn't want to give of his wealth.

We are the man possessed by demons that Jesus exorcises out of him.

We are the hemorrhaging woman who was deemed an unclean untouchable, who is healed when she touches the hem of Jesus' clothing.

We are the adulterous woman whom the scribes wanted to stone, but whom Jesus defends.

We are the Mary Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and all the other women who were leaders in Jesus' ministry at a time when women were not allowed leadership roles in any of the established religions.

This is the beloved, diverse community that Jesus modeled for us.

I believe these are the kinds of communities that Jesus wanted us to live in.

Communities that are based not on class or ethnicity or similar hobbies or level of education or income, not founded on family structure or skin color, but on shared values.

He wanted us to be in communities, which are based upon unconditional love, acceptance, understanding, patience, and sometimes even tolerance.

I say tolerance reluctantly, because that's a pretty low bar.

It's my hope that we'd more than tolerate each other, but sometimes when we aren't seeing eye-to-eye with someone, tolerate is the best we can do.

And if that's the worst that we do when we are in community together, I think Jesus would be okay with that.

Tolerance at our worst, celebration of our differences, at our best.

We are called to be in community in which it's not about fairness, but about making sure that everyone's needs are met.

That means some people need more help, more support than others, and some give more resources than others, and it all balances out because through giving and receiving of each other's gifts, we all grow.

We grow into deeper understanding of each other, deeper understanding of ourselves and where we fit in this world, and hopefully in deeper relationship with God who created this beautiful, messy diversity.

I chose today's scripture reading from the book of Galatians, because it's in this passage that the Apostle Paul reinforces that communal diversity which Jesus valued and modeled.

In this reading, in the famous verse 28, Paul names 3 categories, which were used to distinguish people from each other in the surrounding culture at large.

These categories were the bedrock of social life.

Everyone knew their place based upon gender (male or female), religion (Jew or Greek), and level of freedom (slave or free).

If you knew your identity in all 3 of those categories, you knew where you fit in the social hierarchy.

Well, Paul dismantles that entire structure with one, swift sentence.

He was saying that in this new life, this new identity as Christians, those social distinctions no longer count, because they don't count before God.

While those people still had those identities in the external social world, this new claim did drastically affect their relationships within the newly forming Christian communities.

Paul didn't want them to model their social structure on the one that existed within society at large, and he was afraid they would because that's what they knew.

Also, being different is hard, it's easier to imitate what you know.

But Paul said, 'No, within these communities in Galatia and Rome and Corinth and Thessalonica, and all the other places where I have traveled and established churches, in our communities, we are all one in Christ, so leave your other identities at the door.'

We might take this for granted today, but at the time it was an incredibly radical notion.

What Paul said completely undermined the social order.

He was granting women and slaves equal rights, from the most abject slaves to the most ignored and overlooked women who hardly qualified as humans, they were the seed of Abraham, they were the heirs of all that God had promised.

Them!

His declaration that we are neither Jew nor Greek was powerful, because remember, he was a Jew before he had his powerful conversion experience, but through his identity in Christ, his Jewishness no longer applies.

Our identity isn't about being American or even from Massachusetts, the only question is whether we are 'in Christ,' as part of the new community that God has established, the community that welcomes, everyone, everyone.

Everyone.

It's appropriate that we are discussing this topic on a Communion Sunday, because our theology of communion is rooted in this understanding that everyone is welcome to the table.

There are no requirements necessary; everyone is invited to pull up a chair.

This notion that all are welcome, as I said, was radical when Paul said it.

I think we've romanticized it a bit, because we hear it all the time, maybe it's become part of the background noise, so I wonder if we get a bit lazy about living into it.

By having this tenant in our church's vision statement, it's my hope that we will keep this statement radical, by being in a constant state of self-reflection.

This way, we can make sure that we are always, individually and collectively, as a church, striving to embody the beloved, diverse community that Jesus modeled for us.

Amen.