

Sermon: “Reimagining Community” by Michelle Millben
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First Congregational Church in Winchester, UCC

First I want to thank Rev. Will for this wonderful opportunity to worship with you all today and to bring a message that has been in my heart that I hope you receive today. Thank you for your leadership and how you deliver God’s word and serve his people.

I also want to thank Rev. Maeve for her leadership and friendship in my life. Thank you for welcoming me to this church and for making me feel right at home here and at Harvard Divinity School.

My name is Michelle Millben, as Rev. Will mentioned I am a second year Masters in Theological Studies student at Harvard Divinity School. I am also a recovering attorney, after spending many years practicing in the federal government. Today I have the honor of serving as the CEO of Code Rising, a local nonprofit bringing STEM education to poor and historically excluded communities in our country.

But today, I am just a girl with a message in my heart that I pray inspires you and leads you to greater action in this world.

You just heard the scriptures read today, so let’s dive in!

I want to talk about creating room for community that looks different from what we may have.

Today we’ll be looking at Act Ch. 2 to explore what engaging in real community looks like and we’ll explore how we can create room for community that looks different than what we have.

In the text today, we find Peter, one of Jesus’s disciples, standing up among a multitude of people who have all come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. Pentecost is a celebration where Jews bring the firstfruits of their harvest during this time as a thanksgiving offering, expecting that God would give the rest of their harvest His blessings. It’s a *HUGE gathering where people from other nations come. They came from everywhere!*

All of the sudden, the text says that the believers that were gathered begin to be filled with the spirit and speak in a number of different languages.

Onlookers are criticizing them saying that they are drunk, while others - who are mostly not from the area around Jerusalem - are amazed and in awe of the wonderful works of God because they can hear their languages being spoken by people who don’t even know them or their culture or their language.

These people are not drunk, as you suppose. (1) It’s only nine in the morning! And (2) they are filled with the spirit! So Peter says “no,” what is happening here is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. And Peter could have reached for any text, there all all these passages in Amos,

Isaiah, Jeremiah, but for some reason, Peter quotes Joel 2 (and promise you'll read this because there is so much context that supports why Peter uses this scripture). Peter says:

“In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

Even on my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and they will prophesy. [skip to v. 21]

And everyone who calls

on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

This message in Joel is so important because what I read in this text is that in referencing Joel, Peter is acknowledging to everyone around him, the onlookers, the outsiders, and the followers of Jesus, **that no one is an outsider. That everyone belongs, and that God is reaffirming that everyone can carry God's spirit.** But I also see a challenge in this text: God may be saying to this group of people who are Beta testing the new Christian faith: “You need to make room for community that looks different from what you currently have.”

Since it's father's day, it's appropriate to talk about dads, and I love sharing stories about my dad. My dad is a preacher, and one of my favorite memories of him is how he would treat the poor. My dad, each Thanksgiving, would travel to Skid Row in Los Angeles and preach the love of God to the homeless in that city, and remind them that no matter their housing status - they belonged.

When we were teenagers, I can vividly remember my dad praying over a \$20 bill he would have in his wallet and asking God to direct him to someone to bless. Usually, it would end up being someone homeless. When others would pass over a homeless person because, as you all have probably heard it said “well they're just going to buy drugs or alcohol with that money,” no, my dad would say “God is looking at my heart at that moment, not theirs.” (Side note, as a teenager, I cannot tell you how many times I prayed and prayed that God would tell my dad that that \$20 dollars was for me! LOL)

My dad had a powerful way of making people who felt ordinary feel extraordinary. Anyone who felt like an outsider to the world would feel like an insider, feel like somebody in his presence. And I have learned so much from his powerful example when I was younger.

Does anyone in this room know what it feels like to be an outsider? To not feel included? To be rejected, to have someone size you up or even assess whether or not you belong? I know that feeling, and I understand deeply how important it is to be aware of words we speak and to be mindful of how we show love to one another; it can have a powerful and lasting impact on who we believe we are and how we view our own sense of belonging.

I remember the first time I was confronted by someone who attempted to determine whether or not I belonged or not. It was during my college years.

I set up a meeting with a lawyer in my college town, and this meeting was to discuss my interest in wanting to go to law school. I believed a legal education would help me pursue my career in service.

Now this lawyer [SIGH AND PAUSE]: bless her heart. By the way, is anyone originally from the south of midwest where they say “bless your heart?” Side note, my Mother is notorious for saying that so that is where I get it from. She can look at a woman whose skirt is too tight and say, “she should have worn a girdle, bless her heart.” My favorite is when my Mom says: “oh he is about as smart as a bag of rocks, bless his heart.”

So, let me say of this lawyer: bless her heart. I go to this lawyer with my heart on my sleeve and my goal to serve in my heart. Instead of showing me the ropes and giving me sound advice and clear steps on how to apply to law school, this lawyer looked at the color of my skin, and made assumptions about who I was. And she used statistics about African Americans to convince me that I would NOT do well on the LSAT or even get into law school.

Bless her heart.

Now for the record, I graduated from college with honors, cum laude to be exact, and I made Dean’s List, and the President’s honor roll. Yet this lawyer, bless her heart, still tore apart my aspirations simply because she believed the color of skin would have a significant impact on my ability to succeed.

That meeting defeated me. It broke my heart. Her words had me walking back across my college campus thinking, “maybe I was wrong. Maybe I don’t belong in law school.”

But I’ve come to tell you today that there will be people, critics, there will be naysayers, there will be future colleagues and bosses, and there may even be some version of our politics that will try to dissuade and diminish your sense of belonging in this life.

This text in Joel Chapter 2 that reappears in Acts Chapter 2 is a reminder, unlike the message that I got from that lawyer, bless her heart, no, the message from the text is that **we all belong! We all belong!** Which challenges me and should challenge all of us to not rob the world of what we have to offer by succumbing to some rough draft version of what others want us to be, or some faulty belief about who belongs in God’s great tent of love.

Peter's declaration of Joel Chapter 2 is a call for us to become curious about one another. And curiosity is such an important part of building community, as it was a core to Jesus's effectiveness in His ministry and his ability to liberate those who did not know that they belonged, and those who needed a reminder that they were welcome in God's great tent of love. It is so important that we learn about Jesus's curiosity and the love that fueled his desire to liberate every person he encountered.

When I think about Jesus's curiosity, I think about one of the world's greatest pastors, theologians, and mystics of our time, Rev. Howard Thurman. In the book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman recalls his grandmother, who had been enslaved in the United States. Thurman's grandmother had been taught by her enslavers a different version of the Bible, a version that made clear: she did not belong. You see, her enslavers did not read to her about the book of Exodus, where God's powerful love set free the Hebrew slaves. They did not read to her the Gospels where Jesus commanded everyone to love their neighbor just like they loved themselves. No, the Gospel she as an enslaved person was taught was that she was a slave and that in the eyes of Jesus, she would never be better than that.

However, Thurman recalls that it took a pastor, who exemplified Jesus's curiosity, to liberate her mind from the lies she had been told about not belonging in God's great tent of love. That preacher walked past the plantation where she was enslaved, and when Howard Thurman's grandmother began to recite the gospel she had been taught by her enslavers, that plantation preacher declared "No, that's wrong. You are a child of God!"

I want to ask this question today: Who in our neighborhoods, in our community, or on the other side of the aisle of something we don't believe in, **to whom do we need to say, "Hey, you are a child of God!"** What would it take to deepen our curiosity through love?

Before I answer that question, I want to take you back to that meeting with that lawyer back in my college days. Remember her? **Bless her heart.** You see, although she believed that the color of my skin would have a significant impact on my ability to succeed and even though she tried to dissuade me in my belief of achievement in law school, thanks to some incredible educators in my life, thanks to a spiritual community that ensured I knew that I belonged, and to parents who reminded me daily that I was a child of God, I did not end up listening to that lawyer's advice.

No, instead, I went on to not only obtain a law degree, but I was blessed to go on and serve in the U.S. Congress, the Department of Justice, and in the White House **as a lawyer.**

I say all this to ask this question: is building community and creating belonging our responsibility?

Ernest Hemingway once said that "Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today."

Today I want to share why community is our responsibility. And I want to explore why Peter uses Joel as his text to underscore that responsibility.

When I juxtapose Hemingway and Peter's use of Joel's text in Act 2, I can sense Peter's sense of importance and urgency of why creating God's view community is our responsibility, and why this work is not optional. Because what we do today will determine whether or not we are carrying out the mission of the church in the way Jesus intended with a focus on parity and equality.

Albert Einstein, who is regarded as one of the worlds most influential physicists of all time, said this about imagination: "Logic will take you from A-Z. But imagination will take you anywhere."

Remember how your imagination worked as a kid? Many of us played and acted out scenes like we were dinosaurs, cowgirls, princesses and ninjas, doctors, or dancers.. Our imagination could take us from play and into reality in no time.

Imagination was the most creative way we played, and my imagination was always stimulated when I played with my barbies.

My sisters and I could play barbies for hours. Barbies was where we let our imagination and storytelling go wild.

But one of the great things about Barbie for us, was that the two different versions of Barbie fit our normal imaginary world. And what imaginary world did the Millben sisters always journey to when playing Barbie? We played church. That's right, folks. We would take real life characters from our actual church and make them come to life in our Barbies. Mr. Potato Head, who was the head pastor, would stand the on the stage and one of us would have him giving a firing loud sermon, while the Barbies with the bent arms would put their hands in the air like they were praying, and then the Barbies with the straight arms would just go around and pray for all Barbies with the bent arms.

We were raised in a strong Christian home and attended a very evangelical church. I don't know if many of you are familiar with evangelical or Pentecostal churches, but they can be pretty....eventful.

So the Barbies with the straight arms would be knocking over most of the Barbies with the bent arms down "in the spirit" as we'd seen in church as children. But our imagination could take us anywhere, but usually we were coming from the context from church.

I want you to take the next 60 seconds, and talk with someone sitting next to you, with one or two words, share what your favorite toy or your favorite game or scenario to play was when you were a kid.

[PAUSE TO ALLOW AUDIENCE TO TALK AMONGST THEMSELVES]

[BRING AUDIENCE BACK]

So why did we just take that moment for imagination? Because: Imagination is important because the skill of engendering ideas is a practice and is integral to building greater community in our church, in our neighborhoods, and in our world. And it is important for our everyday lives.

I want to ask you today: are we still imagining like that? Are you thinking beyond your world and dreaming like that? Are we still daring to dream like when we were children? And could our unbridled imagination from our childhood maybe answer some of the questions and pressing challenges that are before our church, our community, and our neighborhoods?

You personally need imagination to thrive or focus on any area of your life.

For parents, you need imagination when your kid has a meltdown in the middle of the grocery store. For working professionals, we need imagination so that we don't become stagnant or burnt out in our jobs. For younger people, we need imagination as we are stepping out to start on the path that is the unfolding of our lives.

We all need imagination in this life, and perhaps this text in Joel and in Acts **gives us a moment to reflect on how we are using our imagination to create room for community that looks different than what we have.**

Peter, the disciples, all the new followers of Jesus, they're basically running a start up, right? They are engineering ideas, they're taking the words of their saviour and seeking to build the church.

What Peter is saying is quite revolutionary because at the time - again - everyone is coming into town from all over the world, and now this text gives everyone a nod saying "you matter, you are relevant, you belong here!"

Let's look at the text: what is God doing here in Act?

- (1) The first message from the text is that reimagining community requires a breaking up our logic and our social and cultural structures. With this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Lord is showing us that young, old, marginalized, women, **and more** will carry God's spirit. And now THEY will be an integral part of this mission. **What is the more that God is imagining that is integral to his mission? That's our goal today to think about that.**
- (2) The next message from this text is: **So take care of them!** Our community is our responsibility.
 - (a) Don't just welcome and say "yay" God brought more. No, take care of them!

- (b) Look at vs. 44-45: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had a need, everything they needed."
- Our community is our responsibility, but what does our community look like? Does community need to look like me? Align with my political beliefs? Have the same allegiance to a football team - side note: "Cowboys nation!" Does community look like people who live in a home like mine or drive a car like mine? Does community have to mirror my life experience?
- (3) The answer is no! You see, the text shows us that the mission of the church will not thrive if distinctions - like youth, age, socioeconomic status, nationality, race - keep us apart because this will be detrimental to the community of believers.

Peter is offering us something radical that God formed in the identity of His people back into this context of the days of Joel....and it is radical. This message of reimagining community boldly proclaims that these insignificant distinctions are irrelevant to what God is doing through His church and on this earth. And now everyone will get equal recognition:

- Children
- Women and girls
- The marginalized - those with a shared story of oppression
- Our senior saints community

Peter is saying that young and old will carry God's spirit. They will be an integral part of this mission. Look at the imagination of God!

Here's why I get excited about this text, here's a little context about myself: after serving as attorney, I switched gears to the private sector and now I run a K-12 nonprofit where we bring STEM education to underserved and historically excluded communities.

So when I see these young, bilingual bright students mastering robotics, cybersecurity, coding...especially the little kids....I get excited! Because we need to raise up a body of believers - especially kids - who know they belong! And by building belonging in STEM, it is one way to remind them that no matter what they have been told, or no matter how much they feel oppressed, rejected, or scared by what we are seeing happening in our country, each day we get to remind them that "you are a child of God!"

And that's another opportunity for God to show off his imagination. Because all of us, when it comes to His Spirit, have an equal distribution of his Holy Spirit. That means no matter what is happening on the news or around the country, Joel reminds us that everyone has a measure of equality. We are all a part of God's beautiful imagination and his great tent of love.

I mostly get excited because Jesus kept His promise! The outpouring of His Holy Spirit meant it doesn't matter how society treats you, where you come from, how much wealth you have or don't have, or how young you are or how old you are, what school you went to....everyone gets an equal measure of his spirit!

Paul says it in his letter to Galatia like this: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Here's my challenge for you today:

1. Take some time later this evening or this week and practice cultivating your imagination again. Dream like you used to dream when you were a kid. And ask God to help you answer the call to reimagine community. Who is missing when I am in community? Who should I seek out, pray to welcome through my doors - whether that is your home or this church?
2. Next, pray for God to lead your heart in how you are called to invest the life of someone who needs to hear "you are a child of God?"
3. Remember, our community is our responsibility. **God is calling us to create room for community that looks different than what we have.**

To quote Ernest Hemingway one more time: "Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today."

Church, let's reimagine community.