

Imagine

Elon Community Church, Rev. Sharon Hammill

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Fred Craddock tells a story about going back to his hometown in western Tennessee once a year or so and going to a local establishment, Buck's Café. One Christmas, upon returning home, he entered the establishment and the owner, Buck, says "Let's go have a cup of coffee." Fred looked at him and said, "What's the matter, isn't this a restaurant?" Buck says, "Sometimes I wonder." So they leave and Buck tells him what is on his mind. Buck says, "Did you see the curtain?" "Yes, Buck I saw the curtain, I always see the curtain." The curtain divides the front of the café from the back of the café. In the front on the Main street entrance, the white folks are allowed to come in and sit while the blacks have to come in through a rear entrance in the alley and sit down. Buck says to Fred, "The curtain has to come down." Fred says back to Buck, "Pull her down." Buck says "You come in once a year and tell me how to run my business." "Then leave it up," Craddock countered. In personal agony, Buck said, "If I take the curtain down, I lose my customers, and if I leave the curtain up, I lose my soul."

While, this story may have been from many years ago, in some small towns in the southern US, these wall or curtains may still exist... I am going to ask to today if you can, a world without walls, a world without curtains, a world without separation...for in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, this is what he is asking for.

- In Ephesians, we find there is some disagreement between Paul's followers and Peter's followers.
- If you remember, Peter is out to recruit the Jews to this new Christian community and Paul is trying to spread the gospel the Gentiles.
- There comes this disagreement about circumcision. Must you be circumcised to be a follower of Christ like the Jewish community does?
- Peter believes that the new Christian Community needs to be circumcised while Paul does not.
- It seems to be a petty disagreement but circumcision is part of the law of the Jews.
- Our scripture today, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians says "He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it."
- So, Christ came to abolish these laws that put up barriers, walls between groups so that they may come together in peace and reconciliation.

So I ask, if you will, to "imagine" with me that world of peace, of tearing down walls, a world of reconciliation. Do we have it today?

- Imagine a church where we could go about doing the work of God without fighting over whether to build a new building...this is a subject near and dear to this congregation's heart.
- Since I have been here almost two years now, we have been in this conversation, in this agreement/disagreement, in this do we build with the university or not, which we decided "not" back in April.
- We voted last week to do a capital campaign to begin raising money for a new fellowship hall and additional classroom space.
- Are we able to afford it? Where do we get the money? How will we pay for staff and programming with a mortgage?
- All valuable questions, but is it worth getting so worked up over that you leave the church?
- We do need a new fellowship hall to replace the Parish house which is slowly deteriorating.

- We do need an elevator for an aging congregation and for disabled folks who are a part of our congregation and who visit our congregation.
- We just need to realize that we are all on the same team, and while our opinions and concerns may be different, we are part of God's family and we need to reconcile with those we do not agree with.
- Imagine a church community where we can go about doing God's work by welcoming the stranger in our midst...
- Welcoming someone not like us, someone with a story to tell, someone who has been marginalized, rejected, or even demonized in some Christian Communities.
- Imagine, are we that Christian community? Do we look at someone different from us and refuse to speak to that person because the color of their skin, their casual clothes that they wear to church, their sexual orientation?
- For the most part, Elon Community UCC is a very welcoming and friendly church. We try to do our part to speak to those who are visiting among us. We reach out when our church family is in need.
- We do try to welcome the stranger, however, are we sincere? Do we really want someone "different" among us?
- We need to remember Paul's words "So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."
- Paul is teaching us here that we are all part of God's household and that we are no longer strangers, but members together. So welcoming the stranger means to be inviting one who is already a member of God's household.
- Imagine a world of reconciliation and peace. There has always been conflicts in the church from the beginning and still exists today.
- Ephesians promotes peace in the church. Imagine a world where we all accept each other for who we were in Christ, not what we believe. Is their peace in the church universal today? Ecumenical communities try to come together to respect each other. Our Elon churches in the Lenten season are going to meet once a week at the various churches for worship and lunch. This is to help one learn a little more about that congregation and its belief and community. We are going to try to create the church of peace Paul is talking about, putting aside beliefs and dogmas and coming together to remember and to reflect on our meditation of the Lenten season.
- Denominations, beliefs, literal Biblical interpretation vs. scholarly interpretation creates tensions and walls in Christian society that cause many not to want to be a part of an organized church or religion or denomination.
- Imagine a world, where we put those things aside...who is right and who is wrong and simply did ministry as Jesus taught...helping the poor and oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, helping the captive, and reaching out the widows and orphans.
- This past week, our youth was given that opportunity to do such a ministry.
- Imagine a place where young people and adults from North Carolina and Virginia along with college counselors can go and gather and spend a week with no cell phones (well almost), no CD players, no video games, or TV.
- Imagine a place where young people can go and join together with youth from other denominations to work for the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the hungry.
- Imagine a place where young people can gather to explore their relationship with God, examine their lives in Christ, talk about the worries, concerns, and burdens, and talk with God about the challenges they are facing.

- Well this week five of our youth along with myself, went to such a place—Carolina Cross Connection.
- We had the opportunity to do these things.
- As Paul teaches us in Ephesians that we must tear down the walls that divide us—male and female, black and white, Methodist and UCC, rich and poor, healthy and sick, and build a community of faith—that is what we did.
- That is what we experienced at CCC this week—We built Christian communities and went out and were the hands and feet of Christ, ministering to the poor, the oppressed, the sick, and the widows.
- Imagine a world of peace. This passage preaches the peace of Christ—it's not about circumcised vs. uncircumcised, conservative vs. liberal, fundamental vs. mainline, Protestant vs. Catholic. It is about loving Christ, being a Christian Community, tearing down the walls of racism, sexism, and all those other things that divide. It is about coming together as the body of Christ, doing as the young people and I did this week.
- We worked together to those in need, not just physical needs such as painting, building and cleaning, but spiritual and emotional needs—sitting and listening to their story, showing compassion for their condition, just letting them know we love them.
- In closing I would like to read a verse of John Lennon's song "Imagine."

Imagine no possessions
 It's easy if you can
 No need for greed or hunger
 A brotherhood of man
 Imagine all the people
 Sharing all the world

You may say that I'm a dreamer
 But I'm not the only one
 I hope someday you'll join us
 And the world will live as one

So Imagine if you can a world where we do live as one...a world of peace in Christ. Amen.