

**UNTHINKABLE**  
**Rev. Gregory Flint**  
**Acts 11: 1 – 18**  
**May 2, 2010**  
**(Pluralism Sunday)**

In the public elementary school of my childhood in small town Minnesota, each class day began with the school principal's voice on the intercom...praying. He prayed that God would bless our day as teachers and students, that we all might do our best and try hard. And that each might feel the presence of Jesus in our school, who by his death on a cross made us acceptable to God and fit for salvation in heaven.

Thinking back on it, I'm not sure I was all that concerned about my eternal salvation then. I was probably more preoccupied with walking home from school with Molly Kinseth, the angel with flaming red hair.

Nor did I think there was anything wrong with such a prayer. After all, everyone I knew went to church anyway. I couldn't use the try-to-get-out-of-Sunday-School argument of, "But Mom, my friends don't have to go!" All my friends did go to Sunday School. And no one would have even thought about scheduling a marathon on Sunday morning.

There was a Catholic school in my town. But the word on our public school playground was that those Catholic kids weren't really Christians like us. For they worship the Pope – don't they?

There were a few Jewish families. Tommy Kaise was Jewish and a friend, though I never asked him how he felt about the principal's morning prayer. I remember though that Tommy stayed home from school on Good Fridays after the Good Friday he was beat up by some older boys who yelled, "Christ killer!" as they punched him.

But the prayer by the principal was not an issue. No one would have made it an issue. For the churches were the moral and spiritual infrastructure. We were Christian people in a Christian town in a Christian nation.

And in the town's churches, mission meant raising money to send missionaries "over there" to make Christians of those who weren't. Because Christianity was, if not the only true religion, at least God's favorite and the only guaranteed way of getting into heaven, which seemed to be the whole point in the end – give your life to Christ now so you can live forever in heaven later.

But, you know, that little town now has a mosque, a new synagogue, a Buddhist meditation center, and a Sikh temple. And it's happening all across America. "The Pluralism Project" at Harvard University, which studies religious demographics, has documented that the United States is now the most religiously diverse nation in the world.

There are now more Muslims in American than Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined. Los Angeles is now one of the world's centers of Buddhism. And can you guess which state now has more mosques per capita? Iowa.

The globalizing of our world has brought the religions of the world to Main Street, USA.

But how much has changed in terms of religious attitudes on Main Street? Are people of different religions merely tolerating one another, while believing there remains only one true gateway unto the Divine – one's own?

Diana Eck, scholar of religion who leads “The Pluralism Project,” says that it is now critical that we move beyond tolerance, beyond merely celebrating diversity, to pluralism. Pluralism is an “active seeking of understanding across lines of religious difference.”

And such a pluralistic engagement is happening. In our own Eugene-Springfield community, the traditional council of churches has evolved into an interfaith gathering. The ecumenical Thanksgiving Week service first shared by First Congregational, Central Presbyterian, and First Methodist, is now an interfaith service.

Though it must also be said, that the more evangelical churches, which is most of the churches in our community, don’t... won’t participate in these interfaith things. But who knows about the future? In the text, Peter also never imagined eating with those he thought religiously unclean. Then he did.

In our United Church of Christ denomination, mission no longer means “winning the world for Christ.” Mission is now about feeding the hungry, healing the sick, providing education, and doing it with local partners who are not asked to convert or disbelieve their own religious heritage.

And in this congregation work has been ongoing for our hosting of another Peace Village this summer: a week when children from several religions create together a village of interfaith engagement and fun, which reveals both commonality and real religious differences.

And here we are this morning, participating in a Pluralism Sunday, allowing worship to form around the affirmation that for us, Christianity – which we claim and love as much as any other Christians – but for us, Christianity is not superior and does not supercede any other religion. For God is not Christian.

Now, for many of us growing up, such a thought, especially spoken out loud on Sunday in Christian worship, would be heresy. Indeed, in most churches it’s still heresy. But that has to change. It just must.

This world, now become a global village, can no longer afford any exclusive expressions of religion that claim privileged revelation or closed access to the Divine. For too much harm has been done; too much harm is still being done; too much blood has been shed; too much blood is still being shed; too many boundaries have been created and are still being created by religion that divides humanity into us and them, saved and not, true believers and the damned....

In the reading for today, Peter describes that strange and compelling vision of all the unkosher animals being let down from heaven on a great sheet. And how Peter is told in the vision that the animals are good for food, which violates every Jewish dietary law Peter had grown up with – just as Peter had also been taught that you can’t eat with Gentiles because such a crossing of lines is prohibited by scripture and religious identity. To eat unkosher food with non-Jews is to make oneself unclean.

Well, Peter ends up doing both – sharing a non-kosher meal with non-Jews which previously would have been unthinkable....

Sitting in that classroom as a child, listening to the principal pray about God’s exclusive act of salvation in Jesus...it would have been unthinkable to say, “Ah...well...Mr Principal, actually, Christianity is not the only pathway to God. For the awesome, wondrous truth is, Mr. Principal and all voices of Christian exclusivism still...the truth is, that God’s Sacred Presence and Extravagant Love is experienced beautifully in all kinds of very different ways around the world as well as just around the corner.”

Maybe in your growing up, or even not so long ago, such an affirmation of religious pluralism would have been unthinkable. But in this world, daily growing smaller, what was unthinkable once now must be spoken and

taught to our children, celebrated and lived by each one of us: that God's faithfulness to and love for all people's is just too great for any one religion to contain.