Sermon given by John H. Kemp
Pilgrim Congregational Church
Duluth, Minnesota
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IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY
Romans 14:1-8

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." With those classic words describing the eve of the French Revolution, Charles Dickens began *A Tale of Two Cities*. They could just as well be written today.

While we enjoy much of the best our high-tech world can offer, we're beset by the worst of self-indulgent individualism, symbolized by the T-shirt emblazoned: "*I shop - therefore I am.*" While I marvel at my single CD-ROM disk that contains the material found in a complete set of encyclopedia or at the wonders of medical technology, I fear the future of a world where"doing my own thing" increasingly prevails. Whether we think in terms of our family or town, nation or planet, our better sense insists we are not only meant to be, but indeed very much *are* interdependent. I *know* that *doing my own thing* will, sooner or later (and probably sooner) destroy not only my community, but also me.

We believe this because it's rooted in our deepest faith convictions - God created, not *just* me, but God created *us*. That's the heart and soul of the biblical story from Genesis to Revelations - God's covenant with a people: first the people of Israel, then with the entire human family in the spirit of Jesus. God created *us* to be in community with God - and with one another. Simple, but awesome in its implications!

We are here today because from many perspectives we're searching for community. It may be the community found in a choir, in a church school nurturing our children, even in a fellowship hour with coffee in hand. But this place, this people is different. However we may celebrate or struggle with our faith, we're here to be *this* community, *this* people, in a distinctive way. Unlike a service club or old friends at a bridge table or buddies on a hunting trip, we are the church because in some mysterious way *God* calls, *God* invites *us* - yes, you and me and others known and unknown, like and unlike us - to be the church. God invites us to find meaning and strength for life's journey here in this place where we both worship God and share life's joys and pain as we offer each other the simple but profound gift of ourselves.

This can happen in wonderful and unexpected ways. An aging, long-active member, whose only child lives far from here, had to move to a nursing home. This person's loneliness in that foreboding new setting filled with strangers at first was almost overwhelming. There were very few visitors - with the exception of a grandchild - and a Pilgrim Stephen Minister. Without compromising the confidentiality of that program, let me just say that this Stephen Minister, with patience and quiet skill, over the months offered the precious gift of caring to this lonely person, who now never fails to boast to me (and, I'm sure, anyone else who listens) of *my* Stephen Minister and how much that Stephen minister has meant me! In search of community. You see, that's what Stephen Ministry is

quietly about, offering the caring hand of community to persons who feel alone, fearful, or anxious in their distress. And friends, to think that a church this size now has eleven members who've been willing to go through fifty hours of training and commit themselves to being caregivers for any of us, whenever we might feel the need. In our search for caring community, these Stephen Ministers walk with us.

Now, a word about today's perhaps strange Scripture reading. So strange that yesterday [today's lay reader] Mack Fredin called the house and asked if I were *sure* I meant a reading about vegetarians! Indeed, yes, for in fact this is Paul at his best, shrewdly and deftly defining the community of faith in language people clearly understood. You see, those little churches in Rome apparently had been quarreling over what Christians should eat. Probably the various house churches had tried to gather for common meals, and there was bickering over the menu. No surprise! We all know the power of food to draw church folk together or pull us apart - even right here at Pilgrim. Besides, any of us who lives with both vegetarians and meat-eaters at home well knows the logistics involved in respecting both the insistent scruples of the former and the uncompromising appetites of the latter.

Paul used this very real dispute to define *community* to those Roman Christians. He reminded them that above all they lived under *God's* judgment and mercy. Therefore, *they* had no business judging the acceptability of thepiety and practices of other believers. Whether they ate Ceasar salad or roast of mutton was totally irrelevant. Because God welcomed people of every kind through Jesus Christ, they could do no less than welcome one another. For Paul, God in the spirit of Jesus had defined Christian community.

Hasn't it always tempted us Christians to define the faith community ourselves by our own criteria of diet, conviction, or acceptability? When it comes time to decide whom we welcome, we draw our circles, forgetting that *God* welcomed *us*, not because we had virtue or respectability or achieved certain criteria of acceptability, but because of *God's* never-excluding love! *We* find community as we move beyond the last phrase of the Golden Rule and love *our neighbor* as ourselves. Jesus, we know, defined that neighbor as close as the person sitting next to you and as distant as the remotest land, as close as your club friend and as far as the homeless family at the Soup Kitchen. William Sloane Coffin has written, "Were Christian hearts full of unlimited love, they would insist that there is no *we* and *they*, only *we* and *we*." How large will we draw *our* circle?

On one of his last Sundays with us two summers ago, Mel Frank, retired minister, spouse of Bea Halfaker, and friend of many of us, reminded me of Edwin Markham's verse that long has been Mel's credo:

He drew a circle to shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win,
We drew a circle that took him in.

In these best and worst of times, may we Pilgrims have the love and wit to draw a circle that welcomes all God's people and excludes no one. Here we'll find community in the spirit of the Christ. *We* have been welcomed! Can we do less?