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## **“In Mixed Company”**

Come with me now into a wonderful, new world that is just over the horizon. It’s called “Augmented Reality.” In this world, you will never again need to be bothered by anyone you don’t like, or who disagrees with you. Wouldn’t that be nice?

Imagine! Never again to have to deal with that guy you just know watches that OTHER cable news channel; or the lady who only wants to sing from the OTHER hymnal. You not only won’t have to deal with these annoying people, you won’t even have to *see* them, ever again.

This brave new world of Augmented Reality is no joke. Jamais Cascio, a senior fellow at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies, wrote about it recently. Already- existing technologies will soon merge to allow us to move through the world with our own personalized information filters superimposed on everything we see. Smart phones can already do this through their camera lenses. And we already have spam filters, programs that block certain information from grabbing our attention and time. And we already have facial recognition technology. Now, companies like Sony are putting all this software together to run on a new kind of hardware, something you can wear like a pair of sunglasses.

Mr. Cascio says this Augmented Reality technology will allow political activists or religious leaders to design “ideologically correct filters [for their followers]. The “bad” images [would] get replaced by a red STOP or perhaps by signs and pictures that reinforce the desired worldview.” There’s a growing body of information already on-line about all sorts of things, and people. With Augmented Reality glasses, you’ll be able to tailor what and who your eyes see as you make your way through the world. Imagine the possibilities!

Here’s how Mr. Cascio puts it: “You want to know who exactly gave money to the 2014 ban on SUVs? Easy – they now have green arrows pointing at their heads. You don’t want to see anybody who has donated to the [2012] Sarah Palin for President campaign? Gone, their faces covered up by black circles! You want to block out any indication of viewpoints other than your own? Done.”

That's the good news, 21<sup>st</sup> century edition: as life gets more complex and conflict-ridden, we no longer have to be overwhelmed by it. We can have both freedom and control, the essential ingredients of the pursuit of happiness.

Some say we're already living this Augmented Reality, even without new technology. Last year, a journalist named Bill Bishop wrote a book called The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart. His conclusions are based on four decades of election results, plus studies of group psychology, product marketing and even successful church growth models.

Never mind the familiar "red states" and "blue states," he says. That doesn't begin to tell the story. Bishop claims that the physical clustering of like-minded groups, what he calls "The Big Sort," is happening at a much more local level. For example, the number of landslide counties in the US – places where one presidential candidate won by more than 20 percentage points – has increased dramatically over the past several election cycles.

There's always been a natural human inclination to be with our "tribe," people who seem "just like us." But, in late 20<sup>th</sup> century America, more of us than ever had the freedom and prosperity to follow this inclination, to pick ourselves up and move in order to avoid living in mixed company. More than 100 million Americans moved over at least one county line in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It turns out that new media like the internet and social networking sites have just assisted the process of the Big Sort. In our virtual lives, as in our real lives, we tend to divide up pretty quickly into discrete groups of "people like us."

This is nothing new to marketers, of course. What is relatively new is the extent to which the political parties in America have done the same thing. A winning campaign these days is not one that tries to change anyone's mind. It's the one that most successfully energizes and turns out the "base."

Here's an example of how The Big Sort works: If I told you I drive a Subaru, buy my coffee at Starbucks, watch MSNBC and listen to NPR, do you think you might be able to predict how I voted in the last few elections? Would you be able to guess what part of Maine I live in? If I told you I attend church, would you be able to predict what sort of church I worship in? (Actually, in Maine, the chances are better than 50% that if I am that hypothetical person I described, I don't attend any church at all.)

As the Big Sort continues, we'll see more diversity in the nation as a whole, but more conformity within the smaller communities where we actually live our daily lives – neighborhoods, “themed” college dorms organized by common interests, social groups, and of course, churches. It may be that by the time the tech companies perfect those Augmented Reality glasses, we won't need them, because on the average day very few of us will find ourselves in conversation with anyone who profoundly disagrees with our tastes and political preferences.

If nothing else, I'd like a pair of those Augmented Reality glasses so I never again have to sit in traffic staring at a bumper sticker that really annoys me! But, of course, there's a down-side to all this.

Last September, Thomas Friedman put it well in his New York Times column which he titled, “Where Did ‘We’ Go?” He wrote about a series of factors, including excessive money in politics, the 24/7 cable news cycle, the blogosphere, that have combined to create what he called a “poisonous political environment. . .

Our leaders, [Friedman wrote] even the President, can no longer utter the word “we” with a straight face.... Together, these changes [in our political landscape] add up to... an American political scene that makes me wonder whether we can seriously discuss serious issues any longer and make decisions on the basis of the national interest.”

In other words: **We can't find the common good if we never meet each other on common ground.**

Bill Bishop writes that 50 years of social science research reaches the same conclusion again and again: the real danger of the Big Sort is that like-minded groups tend to become more extreme. Our biases are confirmed; our sense of righteousness and our desire to belong intensifies. When people only hang out with their own tribe, they become more and more convinced that life is a zero sum game: win or lose; friend or enemy; insider or outsider.

The trouble is we are facing problems now that affect 100% of life on earth, Such challenges demand solutions that more than 51% of us can buy into, not just with our votes but with our life choices. This is no time for us to lose the habits of democracy: not just elections but the very idea of civil discourse.

At the Maine Council of Churches, we believe, of course, that the ecumenical movement has something of unique value to contribute now.

Ecumenism is a way of being the church that is, in these days in America, profoundly counter-cultural. Ecumenism resists the very idea of sorting ourselves into mutually exclusive enclaves. It is, in a sense, a protest against political and cultural segregation, niche-marketing, and living in our self-referential worlds, listening only to our personal play lists.

Ecumenism demands that we emerge from isolation to do the hard work of finding common ground, and when we disagree, to do so in the most respectful way possible. It's slow. It's messy. It can't tackle everything at once. But it does put a very different kind of Augmented Reality at the heart of our life together as the church.

It's the same Augmented Reality that Paul reminded his church in Corinth about almost 2000 years ago. He saw something like the Big Sort going on there. Too quickly, the Corinthian Christians had divided into mutually critical camps, arguing over a wide variety of issues, some of which Paul tried to settle in his letter. They had even turned the central act of worship, the common meal, the love feast at which they remembered the self-giving love of Christ, into a circus of competing interests.

Here at the heart of his letter, Paul hands them a key to unlock the doors that divide them. First, he reminds them that in this new kind of community, no member is inferior, none is unnecessary. All are needed if the whole is to thrive. "The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part....If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance."

Instead of clustering into narrower sub-groups, each with its own exclusive claim on the best way to follow Jesus, Paul says he's going to show them a 'far better way.' Of course, we've heard all about it ourselves, many times. It's Paul's famous, beautiful poem about self-giving love in 1 Corinthians 13, the next part of his letter. *{Read vv. 4-8a}*

By God's action in Christ, Love *is* the new Augmented Reality, the ultimate gift of the Spirit, the truth that survives when all else fails or passes away. And it works, says Paul, through actual flesh-and-blood community, through *our* gifts and *our* faults, and all our differences over theology, politics, and what kind of coffee to serve at coffee hour.

I sometimes wonder what the churches in Maine will look like when my baby granddaughter is my age, half a century from now. The truth is, I don't know if there will be a great revival or if we church folks will be an even smaller minority by then.

But I do know that if we go looking for the church in the future, the only filter we'll need to find them will be this ancient test: Love. The church will be that place where humans, in all their giftedness, with all their flaws and differences, are still coming together to do this improbable thing: to try to embody God's astounding message of love in Christ.

The church, if it survives, will do so because it rejects the Big Sort and embraces its own ecumenical heart: one Body, One Spirit, many gifts. Differences, yes, in both kind and degree of maturity and understanding: but held together by love that is strong enough to help us bear with one another for all that. Without love, we may try to speak the language of angels, but we are no more than a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal -- or in Eugene Robinson's translation, "the creaking of a rusty gate."

So, come with me now into a different Augmented Reality, one that is both very ancient and very relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Imagine this: we enter a room by an infinite number of doors and discover there a huge dining table. There is a party going on. Abundant food. All kinds of people. And there is joy! In the midst of it all, there is Jesus, acting both as servant and host. The room is full, but he keeps inviting more people in.

There are moments when you *can* imagine it, when the water does seem to have been turned, just for a moment, into the best wine. When a few fishes and loaves seem to be enough to feed everyone. The vision of Jesus, hosting the inclusive feast, is part of the churches' DNA code, an ancient gene we all still have in common. It's there to remind us what is possible, even among us.

I think Paul was saying: there is so much more at stake in any given encounter than we ever realize. When we're more hooked on what separates us than we are liberated by what connects us, we're missing the whole point of what God is trying to do in the world, through the church, through us -- even us, even here, even now.

The places in America where we come together on common ground are disappearing. That is what the church through the ecumenical movement might

offer now, as a hard-won example to our neighbors: a fear-free, no-filibustering zone where we practice living in mixed company, in Christ's Augmented Reality.

To get there will require us to resist some very big cultural trends. It doesn't mean we abandon our quest for justice. It doesn't mean we never disagree. It will require us to practice speaking the truth to one another, in love, which can be a lot harder than speaking truth to secular power.

But we know something essential: We know that when God chooses to do a new thing, it always seems to be in the midst of weakness and brokenness.

At this fractured moment, all we've got to go on are these stories in here, and each other, and faith and hope and love.

Somehow, it will be enough. In this season of Epiphany, may we help each other to see with new eyes, to notice the signs pointing the way to the feast. And may we all get there, together.

Amen.