

Jake Joseph
Laity Sunday, April 29, 2007
Psalm 38:14-20

Good Morning Plymouth. I know you might have expected me to come up here and attempt to give some sort of a rousing optimistic youthful sermonette, but in attempting to compose such a sermon, I came have come up with more questions than answers. Before I begin—a short disclaimer that the sermonette that I am about to give does not necessarily reflect the official opinions of Plymouth UCC or the greater general synod of the United Church of Christ. □

It is often said that those converted to a belief system are much more radical than those born into that system. This has been very true of my relationship with Plymouth and the UCC. I was born to a Presbyterian mother, a Jewish Father, and was raised in an Assemblies of God Church. The Assemblies of God meant well. I learned the Bible through and through, the book of revelations was the most important part of their doctrine, and there was not one First Grader at Heritage Christian School, where I attended through sixth grade, who could not list off all the signs of the second coming at the drop of a hat. Little Jake, “when will Jesus come back” they would ask, and I would respond “only when all the Israelites return to Israel and have gone into hiding.” The point of this is to show how I was well on my way to becoming your run of the mill right wing conservative.

Now, in case you missed the memo... I have a little secret for you... I'm not straight.

The Assemblies of God in the guise of Timberline Church didn't like that so well. My conservative school at the time, Ridgeview Classical Schools didn't like that so well either; it was not fun going from “student most likely to succeed to Student most likely to go to hell. So my youthful plan to become the next Dr. Dobson wasn't going to work out after all, but you see I cannot give up my faith. The Bible says, “Teach them the ways as children and they will not stray from it” and that is true, it is very difficult to give up the Christian faith. Believe me---I tried. Instead, Plymouth became my rock, my Plymouth Rock, but still I struggle. All of those teachings about the end times, the horrors of hell, Sodom and Gomorrah, Sins, the wrathful nature of God still haunt me. It is a constant struggle for me not to run back, repent, and be as a child again in the warmth of omniscient knowing. Plymouth does not define things for you; we color outside the lines, which is anathema, a no no, at other churches. That still scares me sometimes, but I am growing and learning, and thank God, the higher spirit every day for making me gay so that I can have this more real relationship with him/her. I see it as part of God's plan. If I hadn't been made gay, then I would still be wondering around in the church of my youth, memorizing the pre-scripted dogma packaged for quick sale to the masses. It's not easy being UCC. It is not easy to justify it to myself along with what I was taught before. But that is not the hard part. The Hardest part of being a progressive Christian is explaining that to other progressives. Coming out as being gay to my conservative friends was not half as hard as coming out as being Christian to my progressive and gay friends. There are just as many questions and misconceptions. The

United Church of Christ and other Progressive Churches are stuck between a rock and a hard place. Conservative Churches hate us and progressives don't understand us! I remember one conservative family I came out to was not as concerned with my being gay as with the fact that I go to "the church of the false prophets". At the same time, many progressives don't understand the concept of an open minded Christian and see us as a contradiction. It is the latter that I struggle against the most. I am a progressive, liberal, gay, tree hugging, animal protecting, democratic, John Kerry supporting, inconvenient truth watching, Christian! To most that is the essence of contradiction, but to me that is my identity as a person. We all have to Come Out at some time or another as progressive UCC Christians, that is not something that is exclusively mine to cope with. We all have all look into the eyes of doubt and confusion as we try to explain being a follower of Jesus and being open minded, I know that many of you know what that experience is like. Not to sound too evangelistic, we are all pilgrims on a journey with Plymouth as our home, trying to escape the oppression of the traditional church and looking toward a future of freedom in faith. We are blessed to have each other and the conviction to stand together. I give thanks that you were here for me when I needed you, and I hope you will continue to share the good news—get it out there to let people know who we are as the UCC.

Let us Pray, "Heavenly Father, creator of progressives and conservatives alike, help us to find our place in the world, that safe harbor in faith and to have the courage to stand up for all the aspects of self that make us who we are." Amen

Before I go and sit down, let me say that I would never have found it here without the support of my mother. Parents you mean to much in this journey, and the fact that she would give me the free will to strike out from the church of my youth, and to find one that fit me, really gave me new life and hope in the lord.