

**We Gather Together
Thanksgiving, 2021
Maple Grove UMC
Rev. Patricia Wagner**

We gather together... What powerful three words those are. We all sense this year, the blessing of gathering together here in this sanctuary, or around a Thanksgiving dinner table and for those longing for absent loved ones you may only now fathom the depths of blessing that you knew when you gathered together. So, to gather together is a gift. It is also a challenge. The virus is still here, people are still getting ill and dying. Separation may still feel more comfortable. Isolation more safe.

We see migrants at the borders desperate for hope and a future and countries and systems they want to enter struggling to know how to manage. We see persons in need on our streets, at our intersections, on our church patio, and we aren't sure how to safely gather with them. And to share a family and a nation; with those whose opinions are so opposite to our own?

I saw a bumper sticker: *America, I love you, but you're kind of freaking me out right now.* How do we gather together? It was a challenge from the beginning of this holiday exactly 400 years ago, in 1621. The pilgrims were ill at ease with the native peoples on whose home they landed, whose help they required to survive. Those indigenous to this place were naturally uneasy, too. Consider the gulf between these cultures. Consider what became of the native peoples. Consider the power of the grace they offered these strangers as they taught them to survive. They gathered together then, and if they could do so, perhaps we too, might overcome our urge to separate, to isolate and embody the grace and generosity of those to whom God first gave this land and the courage of those starry pilgrims who were open to a new life.

We may not have a shared vision of the future, but must we not have a vision of a shared future? Churches have struggled to gather together for 2000 years, and for the last 50 years, our United Methodist Church like

much of the Christian church has particularly struggled over the question of the full humanity and belovedness of persons who are not heterosexual. It is one that has challenged us as a denomination and revealed a fault line within our body that we have learned cannot be talked over or covered over. And five years ago, this congregation decided upon which side of that fault line it had to stand. But to become a Reconciling church is not to throw down a gauntlet, is not a movement to separate ourselves it is the opposite: The RMN Guidebook that we use in the process of becoming a Reconciling Congregation states that to be reconciled means: *"That we are at peace with one another. That we are committed to accompanying others in respect and mutuality walking alongside those who both agree and disagree with us as we discern directions for shared mission. We avoid and do not value divisive rhetoric or actions. We begin and return to God in prayer for guidance and renewal."* That sounds Maple Grove to me. That sounds like the church of Jesus. Where we gather together, all of us, in our variety, equals, each of us sinners and saint overcoming our isolation sustaining and restoring the kingdom and one another. *We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing. Who chastens and hastens his will to make known. And here, the wicked oppressing cease from distressing. Sing praises to God's name. God forgets not his own. Amen.*