It was exquisite spontaneity! During the "passing of the peace" portion in our worship service, an African-American visitor, perhaps nine years old, zeroed in on my wife of Indian descent and abruptly asked her, "Is you black or is you white?"

Joyce, delighted with the freshness of the question, quipped, "Nope, I is brown!" The girl cocked her head quite confused.

My three children, of natural amber tan, thoroughly enjoyed confounding their blondish, blue-eyed classmates who query about their racial origins. Yes, they are white, but also part Asian and South American, all around American kids who ramble on and on in English.

A growing army of multiracial and non-white children are part of the march of what is known as the "browning of America." Since 1960, the number of interracial marriages including Hispanics in the U.S. has exploded ten-fold and numbers 4 percent of all marriages. One estimate suggests that by 2050 63 percent of all children will be multiracial. Indeed, current projections suggest that 50 percent of the U.S. population will be non-white by 2060. Similar projections are being made for the urban areas of Canada.

So, what's new? Most American blacks and many Hispanics are already of interracial descent. While pastoring in Cambridge, Massachusetts, "T" - beautiful twelve year old "T" - invaded our church. I learned that her full name was Teresa Sawa Thunderbird Sanchez Ngobe, a combination of American, Japanese, Native American, Hispanic, and African heritages. Each piece of her name she parsed out deliberately, glowing with ancestral pride.

This racial kaleidoscope is moving us preachers to reconfigure our pulpit styles and themes. We face in our congregations spectrums and rainbow collections of people that run the gamut of racial, cultural, and life diversity.

E. Stanley Jones, one of my preacher heroes, wrote in the heat of the Second World War:

by Fletcher Tink
In Nazism the Kingdom of Race is supreme and absolute. But not alone in Nazism. Many of us have the religion of being white. Where there is a clash between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Being White, we choose and act upon the fact of race. It is our god. We cannot live abundantly unless we offer our race on the altar of God. . . Then we can paraphrase Paul and say, 'He, being in the form of the dominant race, counted it not a thing to be grasped at, but made himself of no reputation, and took on him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. . . therefore God hath highly exalted him.' How can the white race be supreme? Only in one way: Let white people become the servant of all . . . Some are willing to be the servant of some - their friends, their families, their class, their race - but they pull back from being the servant of all. (Abundant Living, p. 221)

How can we serve all? Unfortunately, our pulpit jargon, stories and mannerisms often brandish our cultural preferences on our sleeves as publicly as the Nazis wore their swastikas.

But our kinds of congregations just aren't what they used to be. Recently, I preached to 130 people comprised of 30 black Sudanese laboring nearby in the casino industry, an equal number of Cambodians, several Hispanic families, a number of physically impaired people, and a cross-section of whites - all of this human hodgepodge on a Nazarene Bible Belt Sunday morning!

So what do we efficiently trained preachers do? Some suggestions:

1. Reiterate and emphasize in our sermons the multicultural facets of the Gospel. Jesus was universal man, a biracial and bicultural person - a glorious mix of God and man, heaven and earth. The Bible is multilingual, uniting Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek languages into a cosmopolitan witness to and from God. The players of the Scripture assemble from all over the world and beyond - the Wise Men camel in from the East, Pharaohs and the Queen of Sheba strut in from the South, the Romans march in from the West, Greeks, Turks and Syrians parade in out of the North.

2. Explore literature from other cultures and splice their allusions into our messages. Once, I introduced a sermon with a legend from Liberia. That morning, a Liberian family visiting our service was ecstatic and has since nested there. Watchman Nee, Tagawa, Bishop Tutu, and Howard Thurman are full of illustrative materials. Explore the Original African Heritage Study Bible - how nutritious it is to see how others "read" the Word out of their cultural context!

3. Catch the cultural rhythms of life from our diversifying congregations - the Hispanic "quinceaneros" (the fifteen year old girl's "coming out" celebration), Black History month, Chinese New Year's. Remember that other cultures and brands of Christianity celebrate Christmas and Easter at alternate times and in varying fashions. Our church calendars are not sacrosanct.

4. Dare to tenderly expose those precious nontraditional life stories of the newer
parishioners to our congregations. Often awkward, these may reflect the slights and hostilities where we and cultural patrons share blame. Resist offense and seek forgiveness for collective sin. Most of all, we must wade out with empathetic tears until we hear their glorious cadence of deliverance, redemption and courage in the face of adversity. Weave their micro-stories into the epic of the gospel.

5. Admit inadequacy in this task. Where necessary, find those who can supplement our insufficiencies and, periodically, surrender the pulpit to them.

I've learned that an exclusively "white" Gospel is a skewed one, and that the Gospel is never fully understood or savored until it radiates out of the breadth of cultural diversity. Praise God, it ain't all black and white!

Fletcher Tink is an ordained minister in the Church of the Nazarene, serving as adjunct Professor of Urban Missions at Nazarene Theological Seminary and coordinator of Education for Nazarene Compassionate Ministries International. He has taught leadership development and cross-cultural communication in over 20 countries. He can be contacted at Tinkmetro@aol.com.