

“A Pilgrim Faith for a Pilgrim People”

Some history first; bear with me:

John Winthrop was a Puritan, not a Pilgrim.

Puritans came to these shores ten years after the Pilgrims.

They were followers of the teachings of John Calvin, who we might think of

As the ‘special prosecutor’ of the Protestant Reformation.

They believed in original sin,

And they believed that to become saved they would have to prove

They were worthy by leading a pure and virtuous life,

Thus the name ‘Puritans.’

Like the Puritans who came after them, the Pilgrims

Came to these shores seeking religious freedom,

Not freedom for everyone’s religion,

as President Howard Taft (a Unitarian) once said,

Just freedom for their own religion.

Pilgrims were separatists. They wanted to separate themselves from

The control of the Church of England,

And they also wanted to separate themselves from those who in their eyes

were not believers, who were not saved.

Both the Puritans and the Pilgrims were idealists and visionaries.

I’m thinking they were like an evangelical, religious version of Steve Jobs.

They believed that in coming here they were doing something new,

That the eyes of the world and God were upon them.

They believed in covenants and not creeds.

They wrote documents like the Mayflower Compact

(which the Pilgrims developed)

And the Cambridge Platform (which the Puritans developed),

In which they established the models of congregational self-governance

We will practice here later this morning when we vote on the plans

For our building addition.

They drew the first ballot in America -

A ballot that had them elect not a politician,

but rather a minister, they minister.

Today we use the same language they did: we say we have called our ministers,

Meaning we have called someone from our midst to minister to us and among us.

Out of a longing to be free from the dictations of the Church of England,

The Pilgrims established the now American creed that is the

separation of church and state.

And in claiming this liberty for themselves,

they also failed to extend the same freedoms

To others in their midst: notably to Native Americans, to women,

And to those who did not share their theology.

They were pioneers of faith and freedom who did not live up their own ideals,

But whose ideals laid the foundation for what we practice today and still aspire,

Including the right to follow a religion that speaks to your heart,

And the belief that we are bound up together, all of us,

into a covenant (and not a creed) of mutual promises.

Said John Winthrop, in 1630: *We must be knit together, in this work, as one person.*

Says our nation's motto, here on our currency: *E Pluribus Unum*,
which if you know your Latin you know means "*Out of Many, One.*"

And says our affirmation that we say every Sunday:

*This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, to seek truth in love,
and help one another.*"

Are the ways in which these words echo each other just some happy coincidence,

Just some unintended accident?

I don't think so!

You might be wondering:

Nathan, why the history lesson?

Well, one reason, as a favor.

Now, if and when the conversation with Uncle So-and-So
 Begins to drag on Thursday you have, if you have been listening,
 A few facts to share.

And second: Because I've found myself thinking this week of our forbears,
 And thinking of something I read by Forrest Church,
 A minister of our faith, my teacher, who died this fall too young from cancer,
 Who said "*To know a nation's spirit, look first to its holidays,*"
 Which would be a despairing observation, I think, were it not for Thanksgiving,
 Thanksgiving our most religious non-Christian holiday that Forrest says:
*"symbolizes everything that unites us as Americans because
 No one is excluded from the Thanksgiving Table.
 And in a sense, he says, this is what makes Thanksgiving something like an American Seder...
 Because not only does the Passover Seder's focus on food and family
 Evoke the spirit of our Thanksgiving feast,
 But also the ancient Hebrews' forty-year passage through the wilderness
 To freedom (which the Passover commemorates) was the scriptural model
 For the Pilgrim's own journey to America."*

And so while I have been thinking and reading up on our forbears this week,
 I have also been thinking of us, and I have been drawing a line from them
 To you and me,
 So that while I have been reading about the Mayflower journey
 Over here, about the 133 souls (32 of whom were children),
 plus one bull mastiff and one spaniel
 Who departed from Plymouth, England in late summer,
 And who took 66 days to make the voyage at an average of 2 mph,
 Surviving on the way with rations of hard cheese, something called
 Dried Neat's tongues ('Neat' is pilgrim for calf) and 2 gallons
 Of beer, per day (oh boy).

And while I have been reading all this I have been drawing a line to us
 and thinking also of the pilgrimages we are on,
 some minor, some major -
 Of our journeys home this week;
 Of our journeys to family and friend
 And also of our other kinds of journeys -
 Of the path some of us are on as we fight illness;
 Of the journeys toward healing relationships, or toward ending relationships,
 Of the too-long pilgrimage some of us have been on toward finding work after losing work,
 And I'm thinking, also, of the soldiers in far-flung deserts,
 Whose hearts are on a pilgrimage back home to their families
 While their bodies are still in danger.
 And in thinking of us, our names, our stories, our traveling,
 I'm thinking how all of us, not just the Mayflower names among us,
 But all of us are pilgrims, how we're all pilgrim people in search and on a path,
 Each of us always moving to and from something or someone or someplace or some way or
 sometime.

So these are the questions for today, and if you hear nothing else,

hear the questions:

Toward what do you pilgrim?

Is it health? Is it wholeness? Is it peace with what you have been given?

Is it work? Is it resilience in the face of no work? Is it strength? Is it joy?

Is it life after loss? Is it gratitude when gratitude come hard?

That is the first set of questions.

And the second: What sustains you on the journey?

What is the resilience, the courage, the perspective the keeps you going?

If we say we are Pilgrim People, then we also ought to ask: what is our Pilgrim Faith?

One measure of our Pilgrim heritage is that here in this church you have the freedom to give your own answers these questions.

Here are some of mine:

And would you believe that I begin by drawing strength and inspiration from our Puritan forbears?

That I acknowledge and then put to one side their severe black clothing

Designed to match in temper and tone their severe theology

that said only some are saved.

There is a lot of baby to throw out with that bathwater, I know, but not all.

How can we grow closer to the divine? They asked, in not quite those words,

But with that sentiment.

By living a virtuous life, they answered.

It's not what you say, they said; it's not what you preach; it's not what you profess.

It's what you do; it's how you live.

And if all that sounds familiar, it should.

Deeds and not creeds, we say in this church.

Preaching practiced rather than practiced preaching.

Love is the Spirit of this Church and Service its Law.

These are the words we say, and we would not say them in quite this way

If there wasn't a line connecting us back to our Puritan ancestors

who founded this church,

The First Parish in Sherborn, back in 1685,

And who taught us that the moral choices you make on this journey,

in this pilgrimage between life and death

Is a much more important religious question than asking your Uncle so-and-so:

So tell me Uncle, what do you believe?

And this isn't all. I believe there are more diamonds for us to find

In the Pilgrim and Puritan rough.

I am also inspired by them to ask another question,

a different question, which is:

Who am I called to be in this world? Is there a conviction, a cause,

a mission, a purpose larger than me that I might give myself over to?

Is my vision too small?

Dare I say it? I will. I believe we are starving for these questions.

I believe we often suffer lives scuttling all our energy on details and smallness.

I believe we buy books and bumper stickers that tell us:

“Don't Sweat the Small Stuff” because we're trying to figure out how to cope.

I believe we sometimes go to appointments, fill schedules,

habitually check our emails and Facebook accounts,
 and have our phones on holsters
 because confuse feeling and being busy for feeling and being alive.
 And then we wonder why we sometimes feel under-fulfilled,
 under-utilized, underwhelmed.
 The Pilgrims might have arrived here under-nourished,
 but not like this, not like us.

The Pilgrims and Puritans were propelled by this sense of mission.
 We rightly fault them for the harm their religious zeal caused to anyone who got
 In the way.

We hear Winthrop's line "*We shall be as a city upon a hill*"
 And we rightly roll our eyes and revolt against the ways
 it has been used by our leaders to gain license for their own aims.
 But while we're holding our Pilgrims accountable for their actions,
 We might also ask ourselves: how would I be different
 if I pursued as they did the passion of my convictions?
 if I enlarged the scope of my vision?
 If I acted, to use Winthrop's words,
 as though '*the eyes of all people are upon me.*'"

And just as I have us reflecting on these hefty questions,
 And just as I edge up to that fault line that distinguishes between 'preacher'
 And 'preachy' let me remind us of that other diamond of faith
 the Pilgrims and Puritans have given us,
 and if you have never believed
 that these severe people were capable of good news believe this:
 How they said we journey not alone, but together.
 How they said we need people to dwell together with.
 How the path is too hard alone.
 How the path is too hard to suffer the myth of our own self-sufficiency.
We must be knit together, in this work, as one person, says Winthrop.
We must entertain each other in affection.

*We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities,
 for the supply of others' necessities (what a line!).*

*We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and
 liberality.*

*We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own: rejoice together, mourn
 together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and
 community in the work, as members of the same body.*

We must also, I believe, be grateful. What would a Thanksgiving sermon
 Be without giving thanks? How about one that isn't that isn't over.

And here, finally, I'm thinking again of something Forrest Church has said

In his book that I commend to all us called

"The American Creed: A Spiritual and Patriotic Primer"

In which he reminds us that none of the Pilgrims would have survived that winter

Of 1620 had they not found a way to co-exist with the Native Americans,

Who taught them how to plant corn and modeled life in a forbidding wilderness.

This fact, says Forrest, reminds us of another thing about our histories:

How each of us, not only those related to the Pilgrims, but all of us

owes his or her own existence to the kindness of strangers.

Simply to be here, he says,

no matter what the recent history of your family or race,

Is because your ancestors survived at the expense of

and on behalf of someone else.

Thanksgiving, he says, commemorates this irony,

A model for what might have been and yet still can be.

Can we let this holiday speak of our nation's spirit more than any other?

Can we let it be a model for what might have been and yet still can be?

I hope so. I pray so. And I wonder, here at the end, if we can finish together:

Would you say after me these words: *We give thanks.*

For the kindness of strangers without whom we would not live:

we give thanks.

For the Pilgrims and Puritans who are hard to love, but without whom

we would not have this faith, these walls, this room:

we give thanks.

For the company of friends who remind us on our pilgrimages that we are not alone:

We give thanks.

For the food we did not make:

We give thanks.

For the love we did create:

We give thanks.

For the life we do not have to earn:

We give thanks.

May we all have a whole, healing, and hallowed Thanksgiving.

Amen.