

Gratitude for Courage
Thanksgiving Day

November 23, 1989
Psalms 9:1-10

Mark Dunn
Acts 12:1-5

How many of you remember taking your husband or wife; girlfriend or boyfriend or some special person in your life to the place where you were born or grew-up? Before Diana and I were married, I took her to the farm of my childhood. I even took her set-hooking at Elkins Creek. That's a way of fishing that is illegal in Wisconsin. Diana, on the other hand, was my tour guide in St. Louis as she showed me the house and neighborhood where she was reared. Mircea Eliade said this is returning to the "holy places" in one's private universe. This is a "reactualization of a sacred event." (p.24&69)

Years after the Mayflower and the Pilgrims rounded Cape Cod on Nov.11th, that became an important time and place. Today, in this worship service we celebrate that sacred time and place. Through the reenactments of the Pilgrims' worship service, we call attention to these people who laid the foundation for Congregationalism and the free spirit. This morning I want to step back into that sacred time and determine if there is a message for us that is not so obvious.

I. A SACRED TIME

To do this we need to select some facts and events about the Pilgrims' voyage as well as their struggle to settle in this new land. The facts are selected with the knowledge that we can't deal with every event in one two-hour sermon. This serves as a reminder, for most of you are aware of the Pilgrims' struggles. Two hardships they encountered are important for our reflection.

A. The first is sickness and disease. I remind you that this was before "walk-in-clinics" and the 911 panic number. So, if you became ill, everything would be done to keep you comfortable but you couldn't count on a helicopter ride to an emergency room.

1. The very first sickness they encountered was seasickness. Vernon Heaton, in his book, *The Mayflower*, said that by the time the ship passed Sicily Isles, the majority of the 102 passengers were suffering from seasickness. (p.90) Have you ever been seasick? I was seasick for about 3 hours once when my Father and Mother-in-law took my wife and I trolling for King Mackerel. We were still in sight of land and I was lying over the side of the boat. That three hours seemed like eternity. We were planning to stay all day. We would have, had it not been that their daughter, who was carrying their first grandchild, also got sick. It didn't matter that their son-in-law was dying.

Now here were 102 people "crowded into the chill and dark spaces between the decks." A cold, drizzling rain set in. This meant that it was uncomfortable to go on deck for fresh air. The scuttles and the hatches had to be kept closed because seawater would slosh in as the ship rocked. This soaked their bedding and their clothes. With the lower deck closed off, Heaton said the stench "became almost intolerable." (p.91) We might bear in mind that there were not "hot tubs."

2. Seasickness you can recover from, but the plague that hit them was another story. The Pilgrims found a campsite and farmland that was abandoned by a tribe of Indians. They were fortunate, for the land had been cleared. There were also

fields that previously had been cultivated. Unfortunately, the Indians abandoned the area because a plague had almost wiped them out.

The plague also hit the Pilgrims. What complicated matters was the exhausting manual labor that all shared, including the women. They began to collapse with the "appalling working conditions and poor diet." (p.123) "By April, 13 of the 24 husbands had died; and 14 of the 18 wives were lost. We know only about half lived to that first Thanksgiving." (p.124)

They couldn't build cabins to keep out the cold, for digging graves on "Burial Hill". Most of us have turned the soil in a flower bed, but have you dug a hole with a pick and shovel? It is exhausting work. Once I had to dig a hole 5'X8'X7' deep. It took me three Saturdays and ten afternoons to complete. The Pilgrims were digging graves to bury friends and family. One's faith is the only way to keep going under such circumstances.

3. The plague and seasickness weren't the only sicknesses. There was homesickness and grief. As the summer ended, there was less need for toil and they could now relax. It was then that the full effect of their losses hit their emotions like a bomb. Grief can be like that. Just when you think you have convinced yourself that you are over a loss or weren't affected by it, a wave of pain hits.

As to homesickness, Heaton said "They had had no news of family and friends in over a year." (p.146) There was no speedy way just to let grandparents or parents know a child had died. Isolated and cut off from home and hearth, it is a wonder they didn't return with the Mayflower when it returned to England in April.

B. The last factor that made their pilgrimage miserable was the cold and rain. After they arrived, there was no way to check into a Holiday Inn or an Excel Inn away from the cold. They had to build their lodging to keep out the cold and the rain. Bear in mind they didn't have any McCullough Chain saws. It was muscle power instead of gas power. Blood blisters formed inside the hands. Their skin became dry and cracked from the cold. The author of the book, *The Mayflower*, said that the rain penetrated their clothing. The water on the outside of the coats would freeze.

No cozy fireplace for them after work. My uncle invited me to go deer hunting with him. I left the house that morning wearing bluejeans, a flannel shirt and an unlined bluejean jacket. The temperature had dropped to 28 during the night. Within 30 minutes, after sitting down in the stand, my teeth were actually chattering. I wasn't even looking for a deer, I was trying to keep warm. And I would have walked back to the truck if my uncle hadn't been with me. I didn't want to appear to be a "wimp". That discomfort only lasted a few hours, but how about facing exposure to the elements day after day and week after week?

It takes courage and a strong faith to deal with grief, homesickness, and death. It takes determination to swing an axe while exposed to the cold and the rain day after day. It takes courage to risk under such adverse circumstances. It is no wonder we Congregationalists are so proud of our heritage. Look what kind of heritage those early Pilgrims left for us.

II. TRANSFORMING THE PROFANE INTO THE SACRED

By now you may be wondering why this sermon has included a 1620 health and weather report. I could have lifted up their beliefs. However, I wanted to call attention to their faith and determination in adverse circumstances. In that, they left an historical legacy which we have been able to build upon. So, let's bring our minds back to 1989.

As a church that is a grandchild of the Pilgrims, what kind of legacy will we leave to the generations to come? Will they look back at us as we have on the Pilgrims and determine that this 1989 was more "profane" than sacred? It matters to us what the Pilgrims did on that first Thanksgiving 368 years ago. It will matter to the generation that is living 368 years from now what we do today, and next week as a church. Just like them, we have our hills to climb.

A. Probably the major disease facing the people of God today is not a medical problem. Granted, people do still get seasick, but we have drugs that relieve the symptoms. There are still plagues such as AIDS and cancer. But the disease affecting us is a spiritual disease. It is apathy.

I won't ask for a show of hands, but I think we can assume that no one at worship this morning just arrived here by way of a sailing vessel. For the last several weeks, you haven't been holed up in cramped quarters unable to take a bath, seasick and cold with other people who are seasick, cold and unable to take a bath. You haven't undergone such suffering just so you could worship as the "Lord's Free People."

I can assume that, like myself, this morning, you went out to the garage, put the key in the ignition of the car, started it up and let the engine run for a while so the drive to church would be warm and comfortable. The only rocking you may have encountered was when you stopped at a stop sign. That didn't even make the stomach queezy. Others, of course, decided it was to their advantage to stay in a warm bed.

In modernity, we want everything to be convenient, with buttons to press to get what we want. We want everything to be convenient. The worship time has to fit our schedule. For those tired and exhausted Pilgrims, nothing was convenient. Death came at an inappropriate time, if it ever comes at an appropriate time. The cold and rain weren't convenient. It didn't appear after they had built their cabins.

Today, the church has to offer a smorgasbord of services to encourage people to nurture their spirituality. The church can even give a free dinner and we can't get all the able-bodied members to attend. Even yours truly didn't make it to all of them and I am part of the staff. We want everything to be convenient. We've grown soft in our commitment when we compare our dedication to the dedication of the Pilgrim Fathers.

Apathy is a dangerous disease for the church and this nation. In 1883, in Allenton, New Jersey, as joke, some men put a cigar store wooden Indian on the ballot to run for the office of the Justice of the Peace. They gave the wooden Indian the name of Abner Robbins. To show the apathy of voters, the wooden statue won the election by seven votes. Maybe we can be inspired to reach up to God and, with His strength, we can have the commitment of those Pilgrims.

If at times, we are tempted to throw up our hands and proclaim, "I don't care any more!" think about the Pilgrims and their determination to worship as the

Lord's Free People. If they had not cared about building the Kingdom of God, would we even be celebrating a day of Thanksgiving?

B. The Pilgrims were made miserable by the cold and rain. We encounter the cold when we walk from our cars into the "meeting house." The only coldness we really have to worry about is the cold we feel after the fire of hope has died. Jurgen Moltman in his work *Theology of Hope*, said "The Church is the source of continual new impulses toward the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity...." (P.22) Eliade said, "The church is the symbol of the sacred in a profane world. God to calls us to proclaim 'the Hope of the world.'"

Hope also concerns our dreams and goals for the future. As a church, this involves common "kingdom" dreams. As we look back on the Pilgrims, we see their dream was to worship as the Lord's Free People. They wanted that enough to work for it and to sacrifice for it while encountering miserable conditions.

CONCLUSION

Today we look back at what they did and we celebrate the sacredness of it. We celebrate their determination and grit. We are thankful for those 102 persons who had the courage to work to build a kingdom dream.

In 1989, we, too, have been working for God's kingdom. We have created sacred space. On occasion, at a funeral or wedding, I meet people who live all over this nation. They tell me of growing up in this church. They tell me about Sunday school, P.F. and confirmation. When they do, you can feel the emotion in that. But the work is not done or over. It is not the time to rest or become apathetic. Three hundred sixty-eight years from now, a generation of Christians will look back at this generation. Let us hope they, too, will be thankful for the courage and determination that was evident here. Amen.

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Pub,1957)

Vernon Heaton, *The Mayflower* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1980)