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“Being Thankful”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

Being thankful in an Era of Uncertainty

Getting to the New World was a drawn-out process. The Puritans abandoned England for Holland in 1608 and after 12 years in Holland they received permission to settle in the Virginia colony and obtained financial backing from a London Investors group named the Merchant Adventurers. They then came back to England and traveled to Plymouth, England in July. After many delays even turning back for a leaky boat, on September 6th, the Pilgrims finally got to depart England for the Jamestown colony. This group of Puritans had named themselves pilgrims when they were living in Holland and the travelers were especially chosen to be a member of this first detachment of their religious sect. They were chosen particularly to augment the tradesmen’s skills of the Jamestown Colony and were weavers, carpenters tailors and chandlers. These were the talents that were in demand in the Jamestown Colony of 1620 but would not prove as useful in the more primitive condition and northern condition of Massachusetts.

All this occurred before the English civil war which started in 1641 and pitted the Roundheads or Parliamentarians and Puritans against the Cavaliers or Royalists and established the right of religious freedom in Britain. But now only the Church of England was legal. The pilgrims were different theologically from other Puritans who supported the Roundheads later like those who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony ten years later.

All Puritans believed in eliminating what they saw as the surviving Catholic and Lutheran influences in the Anglican Church, but the Pilgrims differed from other Puritans because they believed in separating from the Church of England rather than reforming it. These Separatists put more emphasis on the study of Hebrew and called many of their early meeting-houses, temples and built them with an orthodox architecture in mind. Like Judaism, their houses of worship had upper balconies that allowed separation of the sexes.

Because the Pilgrim experience in tolerant Holland differed from the Puritan persecution in high church England their society separated spiritual life from

secular life and accepted more diversity until the entire colony fell into control of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691. The Pilgrims strongly aligned with the Hebrew covenantal concept between themselves and their God. Thus, after the Mayflower arrived at the tip of Cape Cod on November 11, their first official act before establishing the colony at Plymouth on 22 December was to establish their covenant which was named the Mayflower Compact.

The Pilgrims had a rather harsh passage due to adverse winds they ran into starting so late in the season. They lost one soul of the 110 enroute from England. Anyway, when they sighted the tip of Cape Cod they decided to enter the protected waters. Their primary reason for stopping was due to running out of palatable liquid which in their day was a form of brewed beverage like beer which could travel and not turn rancid. But their trip was not totally for religious reasons. The expedition from England was as much for economics as religious. Only half the company that wintered in the colony were Pilgrim. Within the reformed puritan tradition from which Unitarianism arose, churches members were referred to as the Saints and the non-church members like Captain Miles Standish and the entire ship's crew were called Strangers. Both Strangers and Saints were unprepared for so primitive a life. Food, which was plentiful, was thought inedible. Plymouth bay is loaded with fish and shell-fish, but the Pilgrims thought the lobsters that were so plentiful, a pest because it would eat their bait.

By fall 1621, the Pilgrim's first harvest was very successful and plentiful, and by the Harvest Feast their numbers would be down below 50. The survival of the fifty was reason for celebration. At that first festival, there was corn from a stash of seed corn left by a tribe of natives who had been devastated by disease, fruits, vegetables, along with fish packed in salt, and smoke cured meat. There probably were no turkeys, but they had enough food for the coming for the winter, and the excess which was not being preserved was eaten. The Pilgrims had beaten the odds. They were at peace with their Indian neighbors. Governor William Bradford proclaimed a day of thanks. Strangers and saints and the neighboring Indians shared a three-day event of excessive consumption.

This first thanksgiving was more than just recognizing a good harvest, but celebrating the whole pilgrimage of being in that less than 50 that escaped sickness and lack of preparation. They rejoiced in their abundance, as we today may rejoice in ours. These pilgrims who previously were city dwellers from the University town of Leiden and the strangers who were sailors and

soldiers and who expected to be a part of the Jamestown colony had survived. It would be like taking any of 100 of us who were picked particularly to add to group that was established on a tropical island and leaving them as survivors in an arctic location. They were told to survive with those trades which would support a second migration society. Every family would have had a loss. There is about that 130 in this room now, think how devastating it would be to lose half of our number. That first thanksgiving every participant really felt the memory of a great personal and community loss.

The pilgrims' farming community and the center of their village was within view of Burial Hill. Throughout their year they would be feeling of thanksgiving of being among the saved, literally, and simultaneously the great loss of their companions. That was the reason for their celebration, they were celebrating a sense of happiness, and gratefulness. There is an old Hebrew story about any child who before they are born God gives them and us the gift of happiness. The story goes that God then puts his finger on our top lip and tells us not to pass the secret.

If you notice that is where the indentation over our lips. The indentation serves no other reason. That first thanksgiving was celebrating happiness in the face of adversary, the blessing of life that for the most part is not of their making, but are available to them. They looked forward to another winter with food, but with the promise of sickness, wet and cold. Many in the number predicted the Civil War in England which pitted their spirit of reform versus the established spirit of Anglican orthodoxy. One author said, " The greatness of the Puritans is not so much that they conquered a wilderness, or that they carried a religion into it, but that they carried a religion which, narrow and starved though it may have been in some respects, deficient in sensuous richness or brilliant color, was nevertheless indissolubly bound up with an ideal of culture and learning. In contrast to all other pioneers, they made no concessions to the forest, but in the erecting shelters, they maintain schools and a college, a standard of scholarship and competent writing, a class of men devoted entirely to the life of the mind and of the soul." [1] But for these three days, are Pilgrim forebears were thankful in their era of uncertainty.

We enter into a similar era of uncertainty. Friday night the vice President-elect attended the Broadway hit Hamilton and was booed by the audience, and after the show was lectured by the African American actor who plays

Aaron Burr. This unprecedented act exemplifies the uncertainty many Americans are feeling, including many who have voted for the Trump Pence ticket.

Thursday our own Saints, strangers, and heathens will be seated at our tables. There will be Redskins and Cowboys fans, Alabama and Auburn alumni, LSU Tigers will break bread with Texas Aggies, Gators will eat with Seminoles as well as those in favor Michigan will be seated opposite those favoring Ohio State. This too is an era of uncertainty.

Every family has them, growing up I had an uncle whose love of alcohol made his speech and manners unpredictable. My children had an uncle Todd whose bitterness brought out societal aspirations which were right of Genghis Khan. Every family has these characters who make a minefield of our communal tables. For some there will be the tendency to gloat, for others to complain.

The Thanksgiving table is the place to give thanks and remember those qualities which we have had in the past year. We give thanks that we live in a society where we can vote. We can be thankful we live in a community where we can receive healthcare when needed. We give thanks for the breath that enters our lungs and the blood which courses through our veins. We give thanks that we live in a pluralistic community; with Jews, with Muslims, with Hindus and Christians, with Blacks and Hispanics as a microcosm of what America is and should be. We can give thanks that we live in a society based on laws and rights which will protect us against any force which could oppress us. We can be thankful we live in a community like this community that cares for each other and those of the greater Hartford area in need. Our food ministries and our justice ministries will work to eliminate some of the uncertainties of the era. Like our Pilgrim forebears we are strangers and Saints together, and we are stronger together to combat the uncertainties that life may throw at us.

Let me end with a prayer by the first Pilgrim minister, Rev. John Robinson in 1620. And think of this prayer metaphorically.

"I am very persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his holy word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those Reformed Churches which are come to a period in religion and will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans

cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw. Whatever part of his will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented."

In the words of our Universalist forebear, Hosea Ballou, "If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good."

In an ever evolving and never-ending world Amen.

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[1] Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans*, (New York, 1938), 11f.