

“This Lofty Ideal”
A Thanksgiving Sermon
Text: Psalm 107: 1-9; 39-43

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I gather our hearts . . . around a single phrase of three words this morning. They commemorate the inspiring story of the Pilgrims and are inscribed on a monument at Plymouth Rock. Let me read the whole inscription to you first, and then I’ll give you the three words.

“This spot marks the final resting place of the Pilgrims of the Mayflower. In weariness and hunger and in cold, fighting in the wilderness and burying their dead in common graves that the Indians should not know how many had perished, they here laid the foundations of a state in which all men for countless ages should have the liberty to worship God in their own way. All ye who pass by and see this stone, remember, and dedicate yourselves anew to the resolution that you will not rest until *this lofty ideal* shall have been realized throughout the earth.”

Tucked away in that last sentence are these three words: *this lofty ideal*. And this lofty ideal, dare we not forget, is the liberty that we invoke as we come to this place today, the freedom to worship God as we choose. That’s the single thought that I want us to turn ourselves around and make indelible on our souls as this week leads us to Thanksgiving once again.

Let me refresh some history . . . and it’s a good time to remember. It all strikes very close to home because the Pilgrims of the Mayflower, the community that formed at Plymouth Rock, are our spiritual ancestors. Puritans and separatists blended, they were the first Congregationalists to come to North America. And though history is never singular, and always bears twists and turns, our roots share the soil that they planted.

The Pilgrims came in quest of religious freedom. The strong hand of King James I in England had denied them the right to worship God freely or to live out their faith according to the dictates of their of own conscience. At first they tried to reform their circumstance – to purify the Church of England and hence the word Puritan. But that didn’t work and so they became separatists, that is, those who pulled away from the shackles that bound them. But as often happens where power is resisted, the more that they pulled away, the harsher the that persecution came upon them. At his height, King James vowed, “I shall make them conform to the Church of England, or I’ll harry them out of the land, or do worse.”¹ In fact, by the record, the threat to do worse came to pass.²

And so for all of the foibles of this Pilgrim lot, and all of the appropriate correctness in recognizing that their arrival bought with it the displacement of Native Americans on the new shore, we need to see it clear. They were a courageous community who came across a treacherous ocean in search of this lofty ideal – the freedom to worship God.

I pause for a moment to add this . . . because history is never clean as we wish it could be. I have a friend whose sensitivities won’t allow her to celebrate Thanksgiving – not that she

has no gratitude or doesn't appreciate religious freedom. But deeper for her, she observes Thanksgiving in a more somber fashion - as a time of sorrow and atonement for the sins of aggression as one persecuted people, the Pilgrims, imposed another form of dominance on the natives of North America.

She is not entirely wrong about that, though I think she goes a bit on the overboard side. I am one who stands more with Will Durant who noted the revisions of history in this way: "To those who study history not merely as a reminder of man's follies and crimes, but also as an encouraging remembrance of generative souls . . . the past ceases to be a depressing chamber of horrors . . . it becomes a celestial city, a spacious country of the mind, wherein a thousand saints, statesmen, inventors, scientists, poets, artists, musicians, lovers and philosophers still live and speak, teach and carve and sing."³ And so we celebrate this lofty ideal.

Bring it here, this lofty ideal . . . this freedom that we engage every time we gather in this sacred space, or bow our heads, or interpret our scriptures, or sing a hymn. Because if ever there was a time when we need to invoke and hold high this lofty ideal, it is our own time. The hunger for religious freedom and the capacity to worship and express as we believe is as alive now at it ever has been. For ours is a day of interfaith emergence in an incredibly rich, confused, pluralistic and diverse world. In fact, our heightened empathies, understandings, support and dialogue along an entire spectrum of traditions and beliefs are urgently needed if we ever hope to deliver the future whole.

On the shelf in my office is a ceramic plaque that I bought from at Weston Priory in Vermont. It depicts the earth at the center with oceans and continents. And then, around the perimeter in circular solidarity are the symbols of the great religious traditions of the world: Christianity, Buddhism, American Indian, Hinduism, Taoism, Islam and Judaism. It's a statement in art that the world is God-given and wonderful, round and whole and beautiful; and that the same earth lies at the heart of a marvelous community of diverse belief – each seeking its own expression. It's not a picture of brokenness or conflict or strife, but of benevolence and graceful love, all under the mystery and care of God.

One more step today . . . as I tell you a story. It's about an old horse that once belonged to an itinerant pastor. The pastor talked to his horse along their travels and so the horse learned to respond to church talk. If you wanted him to gallop, you would say, "Praise the Lord!" If you wanted him to stop it was, "Hallelujah!"

Well one day a farmer-friend borrowed the horse. The pastor taught him the cues but the farmer mixed them up. He mounted and said, "Hallelujah!" but the horse stood still. He tried, "Let us pray!" but still had no luck. He tried, "The Lord be with you!" but still nothing. Finally he said, "Praise the Lord!" and the horse took off in a full gallop. But the farmer quickly realized that they were heading for the edge of a cliff. So he shouted, "Amen!" but to no avail. He panicked out a "Glory be!" but that didn't work either. He shouted, "Okay, enough!", still nothing. And then he remembered. He screamed "Hallelujah!" and the horse stopped not an instant too soon right on the edge of that precipice. The farmer was so relieved that he wiped his brow and said, "Praise the Lord!" And the horse plunged over the cliff!

Well . . . we all need the freedom to say . . . “Praise the Lord!” in our own way. We all need the liberty to say, “Hallelujah!” even if only in the inaudible language of the heart. We all need a place to bow our heads and to pray our own words and to interpret God’s word with our own minds. This is the freedom that we share and covet and wish for all people.

And so this week we need to be thankful, profoundly thankful, for food and family and home: yes. For community and friends and the power of love: absolutely. For turkey and stuffing and the blessing of pumpkin pie: you bet. But dare we not leave out . . . the freedom to worship God, and the liberty to bow our heads as we please, when we please, how we please, where we please.

“All ye who pass by and see this stone, remember, and dedicate yourselves anew to the resolution that you will not rest until *this lofty ideal* shall have been realized throughout the earth!”

Let the gathered community say, “Thanks be to God.” And let us say, “Amen!”

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¹ Kent Curtis, ed. Christian History Institutes: The Pilgrims and Thanksgiving in America. Creative Communications for the Parish, 1995.

² William Bradford. Of Plymouth Plantation. Capricorn Books, 1962, p. 5.

³ Charles L. Wallis. A Treasure Chest. Harper San Francisco, 1995, p. 189.