

Sermon

The Pilgrims In Our Lives

By the Rev. Scott W. Alexander

Take a moment right now to visualize in your mind's eye the first American Thanksgiving feast which our Pilgrim forebears shared with their Native American neighbors on the shores of Massachusetts Bay in the Fall of 1621.

If you're like me, you imagined a pleasant and peaceable scene — well-dressed Pilgrims and proud Indians congenially gathered under the bright autumn leaves, sharing a large table overflowing with the fruits of harvest, thanking their respective gods for life's many blessings, and enjoying a carefree day of companionship. This is the *myth* that has grown up around the first Thanksgiving.

The only accurate element of this vision is the genuine friendship and goodwill that apparently existed between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans in the fall of 1621. The *rest* of the story is tragic and brutal.

As you may remember, the Pilgrims who landed on Cape Cod in the summer of 1620 (and then settled down for the winter, across the bay in Plymouth) were fleeing religious persecution in England. They were called “Separatists” because they wanted to be completely *separate* from the Church of England. They wanted to choose their own ministers democratically, and run their own congregations. They insisted on local autonomy, just as Unitarian Universalist congregations do, today. In fact, the Pilgrims’ original church, the First Parish in Plymouth, later became a Unitarian church, and remains a UU congregation today.

The circumstances which led to the Pilgrims coming to the New World were *not* very pleasant. William Bradford, the first Governor of the new colony, describes what life was like for the Separatists in England:

They could not long continue in any peaceable condition, but were hunted and persecuted on every side. ... Some were taken and clapt up in prison. Others had their houses besett and wacht night and day, and hardly escaped their hands. And the most were faine to flie and leave their houses and habitations, and the means of their livelihood. Yet, seeing themselves thus molested, and that there

was no hope of their continuance there, by a joynt consent, they resolved to goe into the Low Countries, where they heard was freedom of religion for all.

After a few years of relative safety and freedom in Holland the Separatists, fearing the assimilation of their young into Dutch culture and religion, decided that the only way to preserve their faith and way of life was to emigrate to the New World, where they could set up a controlled community from which their children would not be able to stray.

On November 20, 1620, when the little ship Mayflower reached landfall at Cape Cod, the 100 men, women, and children on board were disappointed to discover that they were 300 miles to the north of their more temperate Virginia destination. After a few weeks of scratching out a living on an exposed spit of sand near Provincetown, the settlers sailed across to the richly forested and protected mainland at Plymouth, where they hoped they would find food and safe harbor to ride out their first winter.

The next few months were to prove a nightmare. There was very little to eat.

They survived on small portions of salt beef and hardtack, and developed scurvy because no fruit and vegetables were available. Almost everyone fell sick, and fully half of the expedition died cold and horrible deaths before spring. Bradford tells the terrible tale:

So they dyed sometimes 2 or 3 a day, and of 100 and odd persons, scarce 50 remained. And of these, in the time of most distress, there was but 6 or 7 sound persons who, to their great commendations be it spoken, spared no pains, night or day, but with abundance of toyle and hazard of their own health, fetched them woods, made them fires, drest their meat, washed their loathsome cloaths, cloated and uncloated them — in a word, did all the homely and necessarie offices for them which dainty and quesie stomaks cannot endure to here be named.

The historical record clearly shows that without the help of the local Wampanoag Indians who generously shared food with the Pilgrims that winter, and showed them how to plant and cultivate the native corn the next spring and summer, the colony would have certainly been wiped out by

starvation and disease. Luckily for the fifty survivors, that first summer was a generous one. The harvest was so good that by late November, as Bradford put it, they were “safely gathered in ere the winter storms begin.”

And here is the part of the story that spiritually stuns me. In spite of all the hardships and horrors they had endured, in spite of what must have been their nearly bottomless grief and suffering, the surviving Pilgrims decided to mark their good fortune and give thanks to both God and creation!

They put on a three day “blowout” of food and festivities for themselves and their Indian friends, Chief Massasoit and ninety other Wampanoags. Again, Bradford’s account:

Our harvest being gotten in, our Govenor sente four men out fowling so that we might, after a more special manner, rejoyce together after we had gathered the fruite of our labours . . . And although it may not always be so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from wante that we often wish others partake of our plentie.

The part of this historical account that I want to focus on is not the happy ending with the plenteous and peaceable feast, but the tougher, brutal *first* part. Ponder the *absolute horror* of that first Plymouth winter. By spring, no family was left unmarred by the ravages of disease, despair and death.

Imagine living in cold, dirty hovels watching half the people you know and love perish because of natural forces beyond your control.

It is spiritually important that we not romanticize that first American Thanksgiving as some carefree festival of reckless joy. The Pilgrims seated at that first Thanksgiving table were haggard survivors — exhausted men and women still thin and weak, wearing little more than rags. Yes, they were grateful to have endured, to be sure, but looming over whatever happy feelings they mustered must have lingered incredibly deep measures of grief and fear.

It's a miracle of the heart that those pilgrims could even think of giving thanks to God, or celebrating life's bounty with their Indian neighbors.

No one could have really blamed them if they had decided instead to hold a service of mourning for the dead and withdrawn into their own sadness in the gathering autumn darkness.

It seems to me that what makes the *real* Thanksgiving story so remarkable is not the joy which the Pilgrims and Indians shared, but rather that their *painful backdrop of grief* was not allowed to block out their celebration. What makes that first American harvest festival so nobly instructive is our remembering the profound depths of misery which *preceded* the Pilgrim's decision to celebrate and share. Somehow they were able to choose gratitude over bitterness, generosity over greed, thanksgiving over self-pity.

We all have known pilgrims. Time and again we meet courageous individuals who also have answered pain and tragedy with brave and grateful resolve. Joe Russo is a pilgrim I shall never, ever forget. What he spiritually taught me about life and living is forever etched in my heart.

Joe was a strapping 24-year-old who drove a bulldozer at the Memphis city dump, until one day he suddenly fell down in the shower, never to walk again because of a rare, degenerative neurological disease that quickly paralyzed most of his body. By the time I met him during the year I served as a chaplain at the City of Memphis Hospitals, Joe, confined to a bed for almost two years, could move little more than his eyes. He even required a

respirator because the disease had destroyed the chest muscles that allowed him to breathe on his own. He could talk, but only by constricting the few remaining neck muscles under his control.

When I first approached his door it was with much trepidation. I was sure the visit would be sad and painful. How could a young man struck down by a cruel disease in the prime of his life not be angry and embittered? What comfort could I possibly offer him?

What I didn't know was that Joe was a thanksgiving pilgrim. His little 10-by-15-foot room was the spiritual and social center of the entire 2,000 bed hospital. By sheer force of personality and will, Joe refused to let his *physical* paralysis paralyze him spiritually or emotionally. The visitors, including his large and attentive Roman Catholic family, were legion. They came to sing, and read to Joe. His room was filled with flowers, silly doodads, and laughter from the latest joke. Refusing to focus for very long on himself and his troubles, Joe was tireless with his questions about *my* day, *my* plans, *my* love life, *my* ideas, *my* dreams, *my* opinions and prejudices. That tiny hospital room was one of the largest and loveliest human spaces I have ever known. Joe chose to live fully,

vibrantly, even when life had taken away most of what you and I think makes life tolerable and worth living. He was still grateful for the gift of life, and ready to live it as fully as he could! Without denying the senseless tragedy which had befallen him, he chose hope over despair, community over isolation, laughter over tears, others over self, caring over indifference. Joe chose life over death. Joe was a pilgrim who taught me how to love life, and live.

I have been fortunate enough to know other pilgrims—good and brave souls who have refused to let life’s painful deprivations rob them of life, community and purpose. Those who come first to mind are the many I have met through my decade of work with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, courageous folks who, while living with a virtual death sentence, have chosen to keep on giving, caring, celebrating, living.

Victor Frankl, a pilgrim who survived Auschwitz, said:

Everything can be taken from [us] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms, to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way. And there were [in Auschwitz] always choices to make. Every

day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom. Any [one] can decide what shall [spiritually] become of [oneself]. It is this spiritual freedom which cannot be taken away, that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

So this Thanksgiving, I would have you remember the Pilgrims. Remember those brave survivors at Plymouth who, enveloped in sorrow and grief, laid out a generous feast of gratitude and caring.. Remember all those brave and beautiful souls you have known who have refused to let life's inevitable adversity or pain rob them of purpose and joy.

And lastly, remember that beneath your very real griefs and losses, life's holy heartbeat can still be heard. No matter what has been taken from you, there is still life to be vibrantly, bravely purposefully lived. Amidst the many thorns of living, there is always, *always* joy to be discovered, beauty to be seen, laughter to be heard, service to be accomplished, satisfaction to be found, love to be shared. For this, let us give thanks. Amen.