

## ***Pilgrim Dreams***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Thanksgiving Sunday  
United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
Sunday, November 24, 2019  
Text: Matthew 5:13-16

I don't know about you but I am finding it difficult to wrap my head around the fact that Thanksgiving is this coming Thursday. Honestly, wasn't it just Memorial Day a few weeks ago? It's not helping either that Thanksgiving is so late this year and that so many folks seem to be trying to get a jump on Christmas. I have neighbors who are sending mixed holiday messages big time! One family has their Christmas decorations up and the tree trimmed. Another still has all their Halloween decorations up and orange lights blazing away every night. And one house – I just love Manny – has both Halloween *and* Christmas up at this point. He's taking down Halloween at the same time he's putting up Christmas and he's only part way done. Manny's yard sort of sums up where I am this year, betwixt and between on my holiday moods. I'm done with Halloween but not quite ready for Christmas. This is why Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays. It inhabits a sort of festivity borderland between two out of control holidays as it invites us to reconnect with family and friends over good food as we count our blessings.

Thanksgiving, as you know, is the modern remembrance of a mythologized meal which took place almost 400 years ago. The story goes that the Pilgrims and Native Americans sat down to a

meal together to celebrate the successful establishment of the Plymouth settlement. The foods on our tables supposedly trace their origins back to that first meal although historians quickly point out that our 21<sup>st</sup> century Thanksgiving dinner table bears little resemblance to the one at which those first diners sat. Proof of this is easily visible at Plymouth Plantation, where you can pay a respectable sum of money to have either a traditional American Thanksgiving dinner (turkey, gravy, stuffing, etc.) OR you can have a replica meal of what was most likely eaten at that first Thanksgiving dinner at the Plymouth Colony (wild turkey, mussels, cabbage, leeks, fried fish, roast pork, cheesecake). When I checked the Plymouth Plantation website on Saturday, the traditional Thanksgiving meals were completely sold out but tickets were still available for the 17<sup>th</sup> century style “Harvest Celebration Dinner.” No surprise there...

One aspect of Thanksgiving I think it's important for us in the congregational tradition to remember is that the Pilgrims – whose special feast the mythical First Thanksgiving was – are our people. Really. Congregationalists such as us, right here in this church, are the modern day Pilgrims. Well, sort of. The Pilgrims were actually a unique subset of a larger protestant group known as the Puritans. Both originated in England where the Puritans earned their name by their insistence that the Church of England had not gone far enough in separating itself from the Roman

Catholic Church. So, their aim was to “purify” the Church of England to be more in line with what they considered to be simpler forms of worship and doctrine, stripped of much of the Roman Catholic practices and beliefs. They especially emphasized the importance of personal piety and the revelation of God to the individual through the Word in the person of Jesus Christ and the written word of Holy Scripture. Pilgrims – the folks who settled at Plymouth in 1620 – were Puritans who believed Puritans should completely separate from the Church of England without trying to reform it. Not surprisingly, the Pilgrims faced extreme persecution in England so they fled to Holland where they mistakenly felt they would find religious freedom. When this didn’t work out, they returned to England only to embark almost immediately on the journey to the New World which resulted in the Plymouth Colony. I have found an excellent video which explains all this and it’s referenced in today’s Sabbath Circles© lesson. Check it out!

The Puritans soon followed the Pilgrims to the New World settling in what would become the Boston area in 1628. As you might assume from their name, the Puritans were not a fun bunch. Their worship services were long – about 4 hours – consisting mainly of long sermons and prayers interspersed with lined out psalms. Music was frowned upon if not discouraged. Their approach to life was somber to begin with so it doesn’t take

much imagination to envision their lives in this desolate new world as devoid of much of the simple joys and pleasures we take for granted. It is ironic that a holiday we associate with joy, fun and warm fellowship is the legacy of a group of dour religious folks who feared that mirth and celebration were gateways for the devil to creep into one's life.

I chose this text from the Gospel of Matthew for our consideration this morning because it contains a verse that is directly connected with the Puritan legacy in our country. Verse 14 reads, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid." This verse was foundational to the vision the Pilgrims and Puritans had when they came to this new land. They intended to bring to life what they believed was God's vision for a city built on a hill, shining so brightly with the light of God that it would become a beacon of hope and a model for what human life lived as God wanted should be. Governor John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, referenced it in a sermon he gave to the Puritan group gathered in Southampton, England just before they embarked for the New World. He wanted them to know this was why they were making this hazardous and dangerous journey, risking their very lives in the process. God was counting on them, he insisted. This was their destiny. This is why they had to believe they could not fail no matter what difficulties they encountered. And, of course, they

didn't fail. Neither did the Pilgrims in their settlement at Plymouth Bay. We're living proof of that. These Pilgrim dreams that carried them across stormy seas and through horrific winters still live today. But the question is, as it was then, were the Pilgrim dreams really God's dreams for God's people? This is a fair question to ask, I think, as we consider the Puritan legacy we still struggle with today in this country.

First, we must acknowledge that the Native Americans who are always portrayed as having welcomed the newcomers and then savagely turned on them were themselves the victims of the greed the Europeans brought with them to the new world. The native peoples across this land had no concept of land ownership. For them, the Great Spirit owned the land so how could one person claim exclusive rights to what rightfully belonged to the Great Spirit? They did not understand that the colonists believed they were purchasing the land for their exclusive use meaning the native peoples would have to leave the only homes they had ever known. Added to this, the Europeans brought diseases unknown to the native peoples who had no natural immunity to them and therefore died by the thousands. No wonder Native Americans right here in New England see Thanksgiving not as a joyous and festive holiday but rather as a day of mourning for what was forever lost. We must acknowledge this, I think, for our own sakes as much as anything. No, we were not the ones to take the

land and bring the diseases, but we still benefit from that legacy. The sins of the fathers are visited on the descendants and that is us. What can we do? I'm not sure, to be honest, but I think acknowledging the pain of the Native peoples is a good place to start. From there, God will have to show us the way.

A second part of the Puritan legacy we still experience today is found in that "city on a hill" vision we talked about earlier. Most of us don't realize that this simple notion of a city built on a hill shining so brightly that all the world finds hope and promise in just seeing it has become a foundational part of the American identity. This is known as "American exceptionalism," that sense that America is a beacon of hope about what is possible for anyone willing to work hard, is the cornerstone of how we understand our country and ourselves as citizens of that country. We believe that we are the best, that we do the best work and have the best lives, and that we promise the best life possible for anyone lucky enough to live here who's willing to work hard. But, as we know all too well just from watching the evening news, a lot of the shine has been removed from our shining city on a hill. We are a divided nation, arguing passionately about just who is entitled to enjoy the full fruits of the American exceptionalism dream and who isn't. We have forgotten that extreme wealth and privilege for a few was never part of the Pilgrim dreams of long ago. All they wanted and expected was a chance to become their

best selves in this new land through hard work, perseverance and unwavering devotion to God. I fear neither the Pilgrims nor the Puritans would recognize their long ago dreams in today's current reality. They would see their city on a hill is no longer the light of the world as greed dominates and even what is considered right and wrong, good and evil, has become murky in today's vicious political climate.

So, what we are to do? What should our Pilgrim dreams be as we contemplate gathering around our own Thanksgiving tables this week? In the spirit of our Puritan forebearers, I urge us to return once again to this morning's scripture. These two brief but beautiful parables show us the way forward, if only we will pause long enough to see it. "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?" Surely we are feeling very flat and unsalty these days when the news about the political mess in Washington gets more depressing and distressing by the moment. Surely we need to reclaim our saltiness, our zest for living, our desire to reclaim our hopes and dreams for the future. We can find a road map back to saltiness in the verses immediately preceding these verses. Matthew 5:1-11 are Jesus' directions on how one regains the ability to live as a person of faith in a very unfaithful and broken world. I'm sure these verses are familiar to you. We know them as the "beatitudes." In these 11 verses Jesus reminds us that everything

that challenges us and brings us low – a poor spirit that keeps us down, sadness and mourning, shyness and meekness – is actually a blessing from God because they open us up to God’s actions in our lives. Our desire for righteousness, our quest to be merciful, our hope of being good and pure of heart, our efforts to be an oasis of peace for others, even our willingness to be marginalized for being all of these things – this is all a gift of God always accessible to us. We have but to ask God to empower us to act on them, to embody them in our lives each day. If we do this, we will become once more the light brought out from under the bushel shining as a beacon of hope and possibility to everyone we know. If we do this, our light will show the way forward for others who are feeling fearful and alone in this land which has lost the shining brilliance of being that city on a hill the Pilgrims dreamed of. We can be that dream once more. With God’s help, we will rise above all that conspires to bring us down and hold us back, all that tries to make each of us less than we know we are capable of being. With God’s abiding presence and unfailing love deep in our hearts, we can find the strength to acknowledge where we have gone wrong so that we can do better, so that we can become once more the shining city on a hill that welcomes everyone – rich or poor; white, black or brown; people of deep faith or no sense of God at all; people who love deeply in many different ways. Dear friends, on this Thanksgiving we must remember, pray and



celebrate what we know in our heart of hearts to be true – that nothing is impossible with God – not even returning the luster to the shining city on a hill our country was founded to be. May it be so, God. May it be so. Amen.