

**“OUR PILGRIM JOURNEY,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 22, 2020**

This past week I attended a zoom meeting of a community advisory board for one of our local hospital systems. Most of the meeting was focused on how area hospitals were meeting the challenge of medical care in a time of pandemic. The word was good—and bad.

The *good* news is that mortality rates for Covid-19 patients are down from earlier this year. Fewer people with Covid-19 have died. This may be due to better, more informed treatment, born of now-considerable experience. Yet there is also some speculation among medical people that the four different strains of Covid-19 found right now in Michigan may have mutated and thus might be somewhat less lethal than before. In other words, our four strains out of many more found worldwide might not be as life-threatening across the board as we saw last spring or even as other states are still experiencing. The *bad* news is that there could be a “monster wave” ahead of us, exposing more people who are truly vulnerable because of age or health conditions, even if our Covid-19 strains aren’t quite as bad.

Those of the words of the medical people. Just over the last several weeks, the local hospitals have seen almost a tripling of Covid-19 cases. It seems likely to build. The hospitals in many communities across Michigan could end up completely overwhelmed. It’s not just a matter of space but also staffing. Who’s is going to take care of all the patients who arrive at the hospital for treatment?

Anyone who is hospitalized with Covid-19 has to be carefully monitored because patients have been known to taken a sudden, drastic turn for the worse. This is what has motivated our governor to announce the steps she has to restrict gatherings in public and private places. This is why she and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services are imploring everyone to wear masks and even limit family gatherings this Thanksgiving. This is why our own congregation, which takes the health of all members seriously, has also suspended on-site worship and programs for the next three weeks. Our own hope is that if we and others act responsibly now we will be able to worship together come Christmas, which is little more than a month away.

Some Thanksgiving, eh? It’s certainly going to be different as we pull back and take the precautions that are so important and necessary. At the same time, there’s no reason why we can’t continue to give thanks. In fact, gratitude can be a valuable attitude to help us get through a time like this. If anything, the sacrifices we make should make us more thankful for what we had in healthier times and simply took for granted.

For here and now, we can also be grateful for those tender mercies God continues to bestow—good health if we’ve kept it and the resources to battle Covid-19 through both treatment and already pending vaccines. Not to be discounted either are the opportunities

afforded by technology to help us stay in touch and connected with people we love even when we have to physically isolate ourselves. A phone call or zoom call or Facebooking may not be as sweet as being together in person, giving each other handshakes, high fives, and hugs. But it's *not* nothing. Yes, I'm all the more grateful for what I have and am privileged to still enjoy even under our more difficult circumstances.

If you know your history, you know that this whole Thanksgiving holiday is about giving thanks in the face of adversity. President Abraham Lincoln first made Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863 in the depths of the American Civil War, right after the bloody Battle of Gettysburg when our land was still sundered by terrible conflict. But the holiday has its deeper roots in the celebration of a Pilgrim community, despite their many troubles, which were far more formidable and daunting than our own.

Originally known as Separatists because of their decision to separate out from the Church of England a hundred years after the Protestant Reformation, the so-called Pilgrims faced acute discrimination in England for their religious beliefs which were viewed as a threat to the king's government and national stability. Consequently, the Pilgrims decided to emigrate to nearby Holland across the English Channel where they were assured of religious freedom as the reformed Christians they were.

However, most of the Pilgrims, who were farmers back in England, had trouble finding jobs in the Dutch City of Leiden which welcomed them. Moreover, they soon felt that their kids were being corrupted by the overly free-and-easy ways of the Dutch. This prompted a group decision to up-end their lives all over again in order to seek religious freedom and economic opportunity for themselves on North American shores.

Since none of the Pilgrims were well-to-do, they made a bargain with a group of English investors who were willing to finance their move and resettlement in exchange for future payoff, based on anticipated profits from farming and fur-trapping. Those English investors were not especially generous. Returning to England for just a brief layover the Pilgrims found themselves climbing aboard two old weather-beaten ships, setting sail from Plymouth, England.

One of the boats, most ironically called the *Speedwell*, was completely unseaworthy. It spouted so many leaks that, after just a couple of days out, it had return to port. The second ship, famous to us as the *Mayflower*, also headed back to port until the Pilgrim community figured out what to do next. In the end, just about all the Pilgrims crowded onto the *Mayflower*, resuming the crossing to America two months later than originally planned—in September, rather than July. With rough seas, poor food, and crowded conditions the *Mayflower* passage was harrowing. Although a baby was born, there were a couple of deaths too, with the bodies cast into the sea. Once the Pilgrims actually arrived in the Cape Cod Bay,

two more died because of illness and accident. Sad to say, it was an omen for what was to come.

Of course, the Pilgrims' extended delay because of the leaking *Speedwell* meant a later seasonal landing for the *Mayflower*. They pulled into Massachusetts Bay in the latter days of November when everything was already turning bitterly cold. Although once ashore the Pilgrims were able to build a few structures to house their numbers for the winter months ahead, it was all pretty crude. Moreover, what was erected amounted to common dormitory and dining spaces without much privacy or opportunities for what we today call "social distancing." This proved to be lethal or deadly when disease broke out. The cold, inadequate nutrition, and limited or non-existence medical care, combined with the rude housing conditions, created a death spiral.

Consider this. When the Pilgrims first landed and started their new settlement at Plymouth, Massachusetts there 102 men, women, and children in all. By winter's end, five months later, only 53 survived. Half the community was gone. For women it was worse. Of the 18 women who came ashore, only four were still alive by the next year. Everyone still living was close to the point of starvation. All were malnourished.

Can you imagine the terrible grief that was felt? Yet, remarkably, the Pilgrim community did not give up. Instead, they persevered through the year that followed, including another bitter winter. It was a couple of years before they celebrated the thanksgiving event that we recall.

In the Pilgrims' need, help came from God, who gave them courage. Yet four months after their arrival there was also assistance from an unexpected but providential source—the local native Americans. Among them were Samoset and Squanto, two native Americans who had already mastered the English language because of earlier contact with English fishermen plying local waters. This made them both invaluable translators as the Pilgrims met up with the local Pokanoket tribe.

Thereafter, the small, peaceable Pilgrim community was able to forge a close working relationship with the Pokanoket tribe, which offered advice on navigating the local habitat. That included hunting, fishing, and agriculture. In turn, tribal members received benefits from trading, plus exposure to European know-how.

It would be a mistake to idealize, let alone glorify, the Pilgrims more than they have already been. Yet they were a community who had their virtues. Unlike the somewhat sterner Puritans that subsequently followed them to New England, the Pilgrims had a better reputation for tolerance, even though they held their own Protestant Christian convictions firmly.

While still on *Mayflower*, before coming ashore, the Pilgrim community, drafted a compact or covenant agreement which they asked all men aboard to sign.

Signatories affirmed their mutual commitment to walk together in the ways of the Lord and to respect whatever the laws the community together needed to establish to maintain peace and civility. They knew how destructive conflict can be particularly when we find ourselves in unchartered territory and human egos take over.

The Mayflower Compact was signed and sealed on November 21, 1620. It not only set an example for future American generations organizing our nation but also provided a model for our own brand of Christian churches. In fact, the United Church of Christ with its congregational model of governance traces much of its origins to the original Pilgrim community. We can fairly count the Pilgrims as some of our direct spiritual ancestors. The original church they founded at Plymouth is today one of fellow UCC congregations.

Significantly, because no ordained minister had the good health or fortitude to join them in the move to America, the Pilgrim community was completely lay-led. Individual members of the Pilgrim church organized at Plymouth preached the Word. Afterwards, the lay preacher would step down from the pulpit and the congregation would begin asking questions about what had just been preached. Underscored was the importance of accountability for what we say, especially in God's name.

The Pilgrims also believed in the value of dialogue—not only between us and God but also between and amongst ourselves, as children of God, striving to be faithful. As their ordained pastor, John Robinson, said to them in Holland before they set forth to North America, “The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.” Quite similarly, the motto of our present-day United Church proclaims that “God is still speaking.”

In keeping with our Pilgrim inheritance, our congregational style of ministry continues to be highly conversational. Friends, I hope you know that I am always listening to what you have to say in matters of faith because no single person has a monopoly on God's truth and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

I deeply appreciate the humility of the Pilgrim people who didn't have much patience for boasting. No less admirable is the fact that they didn't believe in grasping this life too tightly. They had a keen sense that we are all just passing through this world. Their goal was the kingdom of God. Accordingly, they wanted to live their lives in a way that both honored God and prepared them for an ultimate reunion with him.

The very name “Pilgrim” by which the whole Plymouth community is today remembered was actually adopted later, rather than earlier. It was a name given them in retrospect by their governor, William Bradford, when he set about writing their history. But it was a name that fit and a name that stuck because the whole community was inspired by the story of the Patriarch Abraham setting out from ancient Ur in quest of a Promised Land (*Genesis 12:1*). They also identified with the words of New Testament Letter to the Hebrews where it speaks of the faithful as “strangers and pilgrims on earth.” (*Hebrews 11:7-15*)

Congregation, think deeply about those words: “strangers and pilgrims on earth.” Ultimately, because the Pilgrim fathers and mothers took such words of scripture to heart and appreciated that mortal life is transient they knew better than to be greedy and grasping with things of this world. As a fruit of this wisdom and this spirit, they were more modest and thankful, despite the immense hardships and losses they had to endure.

As Christians, as much as we respect the value of human life and do our best always to uphold it in real and sincere ways, we could all stand to be a little less worldly, reminded that this earth is not our ultimate destination, spiritually speaking. If we stand less worldly on this earth, we gain the spiritual capacity to be more thankful too—as we should be

The Pilgrims believed in a “provident” God—a God who provides. They had it rough. I suspect rougher and tougher than most of us do. They could have become obsessed and forlorn over their devastating losses. But they chose to look for God’s abiding blessing upon the dead and his outreach blessing to the living. Yes, in their faith those Pilgrims still offer a good example for us all. As they saw it, the fact that half of them survived under the conditions of that first Plymouth winter was its own miracle and a cause for gratitude.

Congregation, this coming Thanksgiving, everything is so different. But we can still do one thing the same—maybe even better and more sincerely. We can give God our thanks—thanks for what we’ve enjoyed before; thanks for what we’ll enjoy when times turn better, and, yes, thanks for the blessings bestowed through God’s grace, right here and now. Let’s give thanks for what health we do have, the family that cares about us whether we’re together or apart, and for a nation that, despite all its struggles and discontents at the moment, remains a good place to live, where freedom of faith is possible and a concern for what right, just, and loving remains lively.

Ultimately, when we’re thankful people, God has a way of multiplying our blessings—yes, just as he did with Jesus who fed a multitude with merely two fish and five barley loaves and found plenty left over. (*John 6:8-14*) May we each find comfort, strength, and hope giving thanks to God, putting our trust always in his abounding grace. **Amen**