

“THANKS A LOT, GOD” A Thanksgiving Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, November 23, 2022

This Thursday our nation will pause to celebrate Thanksgiving as a national holiday. For us as Christians it's always important to give thanks. Our faith calls us to do so. But it's also nice to have a specific day set aside for gratitude and thanks.

The cynics at large might ask: “Thanks for what?” After all, there's a lot of confusion in America today about where we're headed. Polarization has never been so rife. We see complaints from all sides about the unfairness and injustice of the way both our government and economy operate. Scandal after all scandal gets reported in our daily news. Yet in response to any doom and gloom we have a better litany. Thank God we're here and alive. Thank God we live in a nation where bad news doesn't get covered up and we have a right to complain, even if we hope that everyone will be more responsible about what they say and how they say it. Thank God too that we have the freedom and opportunity in this land to help shape a better tomorrow for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, and all those who follow us.

Significantly, at the very center of the Thanksgiving holiday we just celebrated is the story of a religious people who refused to be cynical or jaded. We know them as Pilgrims. They are among the direct ancestors of our own United Church of Christ thanks to the Congregational half of our denominational heritage. Yet, in their own day, they were called Separatists. Why? Because of the choice they made to stand up, stand out, and to stand apart from everything that demoralized and compromised others. Their lives exemplified the words of a poster that our own dear Pastor Cheryl Schalm has posted outside our high school classroom door upstairs: *Stand Up for What is Right—Even if You Are Standing Alone.*

Way back in the early 1500s. King Henry VIII—remember that king who had all of those wives—pulled the church in England away from Roman Catholicism. But he didn't pull it far—at least the eyes of the most ardent Protestant reformers. Moreover, in the eyes of the Pilgrim Separatists the new Church of England was as corrupt as Roman Catholic from which it had broken off. Others who saw the same things the Pilgrim Separatists did opted to work for further reform from within the Church of England. Yet the Pilgrim Separatists thought it better to start fresh and anew. They pulled themselves back and away and began organizing a church all their own which they felt was more in keeping with what Jesus wanted and that the apostles had actually built in the first and second generations of Christianity. Discarded by the Pilgrim Separatists was the top-down system of bishops that had been developed to provide church leadership.

In its place, the Pilgrim Separatists devised a plan for leadership that included ministers elected and ordained by small, individual congregations. Lay leadership was expected to

supplement what the ordained leadership offered. The Pilgrim Separatists also rejected conformity to the low morals of the world. Individually and together, they embraced a higher standard of moral conduct and committed themselves to shun and avoid the company of the ungodly. As one of their leaders squarely put it in the quaint language of their day: all Pilgrim Separatists needed “to forsake and denie all ungodliness and wicked fellowship and to refuse ungodlie communion with wicked person [and those[who do openlie themselves transgresse [God’s] commandments.” The cause of Christ was not advanced by compromising morals that simply conformed to the world.

The frankness and forthrightness of the Pilgrim Separatists won them a following. But it was never huge—at most 20,000 people. However, this was enough for English authorities to consider the Pilgrim Separatists a threat to the public peace. The Pilgrim Separatists soon found themselves persecuted. Some were imprisoned; a number were even killed. All faced discrimination. This prompted a number of them to choose exile in nearby Holland, which was well-known for its religious toleration. But the move to Holland didn’t stick. After a couple of decades, Pilgrim Separatist parents began to worry that their children were being absorbed by a Dutch culture that was too wide-open, too free-and-easy for their tastes. They saw their children tempted by rampant worldliness. Consequently, the Pilgrim Separatists gave themselves over to a plan to move their entire community to the New World where they could establish their own colony.

As most kids used to learn in school, the Pilgrim Separatists briefly returned to England and then boarded the Ship Mayflower to cross the Atlantic to the shores of North America. It was a harrowing two-month trip without adequate food and nutrition. Most began suffering from scurvy, a debilitating illness that overtakes us when we have inadequate levels of the Vitamin C usually obtained from fresh fruits and vegetables. Yet the Mayflower kept sailing to an unknown New World. Rather than plant themselves in Virginia where settlers were already living, the Pilgrim Separatists looked to a more northern location to land. In November 1620 they ended up taking harbor in what we today call the Massachusetts Bay. They went ashore and began to build for themselves a crude encampment using whatever resources they found at hand.

The Pilgrim Separatists arrived totally unprepared for the bitter winter that followed. In the winter cold all but seven or eight people turned deathly ill, especially vulnerable to disease because of their scurvy. By the following March, nearly half of the 104 Mayflower passengers who stepped foot on America died, ravaged by constant hunger, malnutrition, and disease. For the survivors it was a searing, horrific experience that must have caused them—like the ancient Hebrews in the wilderness after departing Egypt--to wonder if they had made the right decision in leaving Europe behind. And how could there not have been questions about what God was doing or nor doing? Yet from

the accounts that survive we see the great faith of the Pilgrim people. Rather than wallow in despair, they continued to trust in God's salvation for the dead and looked for God's blessing for the survivors. Instead of bemoaning what they did not have, the Pilgrim Separatists focused on what they could be thankful for.

While still on board the Mayflower, all 41 male passengers had signed a compact or agreement. Through this document they covenanted with each to abide by whatever rules and laws their colony of believes should institute. Thereafter, the Pilgrim Separatists lived by that compact. In the church they subsequently built they continued to call on all members to covenant or mutually promise each other to "walke in the waies of the Lord."

Unlike the Puritans who later followed them to Massachusetts, the Pilgrim Separatists were remarkably democratic, tolerant, and peace-loving. Because no ordained minister would join them on their "errand in the wilderness," they had to serve as their own ministers—preaching, pastoring, and administering the sacraments of baptism and communion. After the service was over, it was customary for the congregation to invite the preacher for the occasion to step away from pulpit and step forward to answer questions about the sermon. The Pilgrims believed in dialogue and conversation! Moreover, they were gentle about it, always believing in value of persuasion over force and coercion. They showed respect for divergent viewpoints. Although they chose not to celebrate the Christmas because they considered the revelry of the holiday as practiced in England was too much a throwback to paganism, they honored the few in their community who were non-Pilgrim and who did choose to observe December 25 as Jesus' birthday. They were given the day off from work that was expected of everyone else.

That same kind of respect was shown by the Pilgrim Separatists to the native Indian population upon whose lands they were intruding. Where possible, they fairly purchased the land they claimed for their new colony. They also kept a strict accounting of food borrowed from the local Indian communities, paying the Indians back, measure for measure. The stereo-typical images of the Pilgrim Separatists and the Native American population living together peaceably is not far from the mark. Again, it was only later as the English Puritans arrived on New England's shores in droves that there was war between Europeans and Native Americans.

Unfortunately, the Puritans immigrants hugely outnumbered the Pilgrims and crowded them out. The sterner, more dogmatic, and less democratic Puritan mentality overtook the culture that the Pilgrims had planted and became the so-called New England Way.

Although we make a mistake to romanticize the Pilgrim Separatists and imagine them as perfect, there is a lot about them to admire. While they did not forego their own creature comforts, they valued the spiritual over the material and trusted the Lord to

provide—just as Jesus calls us to do in today’s lesson from the Gospel of Luke. (*Luke 12:22-31*) And also, as the Apostle Paul admonishes us, the Pilgrim Separatists refused to conform to the low morals practiced in the world around them. (*Romans 12:1-3*) They believed that God was calling them to live according to a higher standard, setting a moral and spiritual example for others. They also recognized their own weaknesses and their consequent need to create some space and distance from those corrupted without concern by sin and selfishness. They organized their life together on the basis of free-will choice: no one should be forced to worship God as they did. Furthermore, the Pilgrim Separatists stressed the importance of always trusting God and staying humble about what we can know. They understood and accepted that so much of God’s workings are inscrutable, beyond anything we can grasp. We need to be as patient as possible, the Pilgrim Separatists taught, waiting on God to reveal the whys and wherefores of whatever happens to us. In the meantime, in the face of what remains uncertain and clear, the Pilgrim Separatists knew to look for God’s blessing, rather than dwell on what strikes them as wrong and amiss. Yes, this is what kept the Pilgrim Separatists from becoming embittered and cynical despite the huge hardships they endured.

For so many folks today, the Pilgrim Separatists are just cut-out characters, useful for decorating a national day-off. But we all stand to benefit if we instead see them as the lively, faithful people they were. Unlike the Pilgrim Separatists, we don’t have a distant continent awaiting as a place of retreat where we in isolation can practice our faith as we understand it best. Yet, planted as we are, we would all do well to emulate as we are best able their faithfulness and their thankfulness—and so much more. As the Pilgrim Separatists showed, faithfulness and thankfulness go together. So too do courage, humility, tolerance, freedom, and a peaceful spirit.

Four hundred years after they lived, Pilgrim/Separatists continue to offer all who eyes to see and ears to hear these spiritual guideposts:

- Do not be conformed to the world in morals and judgment.
- Choose the company you keep well: avoid toxic people and hang out with those who can help you become and remain a better, more faithful person.
- Be patient with God: in time, God will reveal his reasons and purposes which may be obscure to us right now.
- Be patient and tolerant towards those with whom we disagree: they are God’s children too and may teach you things about yourself and the world that you need to know.
- In all your relationships, rely on moral persuasion rather than resort to coercion and force because this is the way of Jesus.
- Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, function as democratically as possible in community together.

- Count your blessings and be thankful: positive begets positive; God will bless us all the more when we are grateful and appreciative for what we have.

Congregation, as we finish this Thanksgiving holiday and look to a new year together in Christ, may we all strive as Christian men and women to cultivate the virtues that shone through the Pilgrim Separatists, beginning with faith in God and thankfulness to him in everything we say and do. To God this night and in all days ahead, let us each say from our hearts, “Thanks, a lot, God,” and mean it. **Amen.**