

More Than Just Funny Hats

[Texts -Leviticus 19; Luke 6:31-38]

Pastor Dave Shackle

November 18, 2018

In the United States, the Thanksgiving holiday is a celebration of abundance and bounty. In 1621, after the Pilgrims' first successful harvest, Governor William Bradford organized an expansive feast, which was shared with the Indigenous People. The Pilgrims were truly grateful that their new-found friends had welcomed them with open arms - teaching them ways to successfully cultivate crops, extract sap from maple trees, catch fish and eel, identify and avoid poisonous plants. Essentially those Indigenous People saved the lives of those vulnerable Pilgrims; an act of kindness which was certainly not reciprocated in the generations to follow!

In the United Church of Christ, the story of the Pilgrims is also a celebration of abundance and bounty. The United Church of Christ was formed 61 years ago, by the joining of the Evangelical and Reformed Churches, with the Congregational/Christian Churches. The Evangelical and Reformed branch grew out of the 16th Century German and Swiss Reformations. The Congregational/Christian branch came out of the Church of England, and the American homegrown Christian Church. This morning, I'd like to revisit a bit of the history of our Congregational ancestry - specifically the Pilgrims. I do so to highlight not only the bountiful Thanksgiving Table, but also in celebration of the open and welcoming Communion Table, and the marvelous expansiveness of the Divine Word, which our Pilgrim heritage instills in us.

After its break from the Church of Rome, as the Church of England was going through its own reform, two groups emerged: the "Puritans" and the "Separatists." Both groups felt that *simplicity* of life and worship were essential to understanding and practicing the way of Jesus Christ; and that the Church of England still had too many of the "trappings" of Roman Catholicism. And while the Puritans hoped to stay and "purify" those practices within the Church, the Separatists

wanted to physically remove themselves from them. Many saw themselves as “Pilgrims” - people on a spiritual journey. So, a group of them boarded a ship and sailed away from England, all the way to...Holland [for starters]. However, after several years there, they felt that their younger members were becoming too assimilated into the Dutch culture, so they decided on a more ambitious journey, to the so-called “New World”.

In 1620, as those Pilgrims prepared to set sail from Holland, their long-time minister, John Robinson, realized that he was too old and frail to endure that long and difficult voyage. [And no, I’m not that feeble just yet!] Anyway, in his farewell sermon to his congregation, Pastor Robinson encouraged them to view this new venture as a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth, and new insight and understanding. He told them that it was important that they not get stuck in the place where the early reformers, or he himself, had thus far led them. He challenged them to remember that “the Lord hath more light and truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word” Or as a more modern rendering puts it “There is still more light and truth to break forth from the Holy Word.”

So, while society at large may remember the Pilgrims for their funny hats and their bountiful Thanksgiving feast, we in the UCC celebrate the abundance and bounty which they discovered in the expansive nature of the Holy Word. Pastor Robinson’s parting words to his congregation as they left Holland, speak directly to the identity of the United Church of Christ. They advocate for an openness to the new, expansive and exciting possibilities that the Holy One offers to people on their journey of faith. These words also remind us that the Word of the Holy One is a living, loving, active word - a Word which comes to life in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ.

By the time of Jesus, the religious establishment in Judea has basically become an ally and an endorsement of the status quo. So rather than advocating for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the alien immigrant, the majority of religious leaders seek to ingratiate themselves to the rich and powerful of society. They even find ways to

reinterpret the Scripture, so that landowners can gather *every* grain and grape for themselves, rather than leaving some for the poor and the alien. [“After all, the foreigners don’t really belong here; and God obviously doesn’t care for the poor, because God made them poor to begin with! So screwing them over isn’t just O.K., it’s kind of like we’re doing God’s work, by keeping them in their place!”]

Yet while many religious leaders seek to limit the scope of who God *really* cares for and loves, Jesus calls for an expansive and inclusive view of Divine Compassion and Mercy. Rather than proclaiming a restricted understanding of Divine love, Jesus proclaims and demonstrates the abundant nature of the Holy One’s care for all people - especially the down-and-out, or those who may appear different from ourselves.

“Love your enemies,” Jesus says. “Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return....and you will be children of the Most High...Give, and it will be given to you - a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, overflowing...!”

Perhaps one of the greatest deceptions being perpetrated by some of today’s religious and political leaders, is the notion of *scarcity*. “God only has a finite amount of love to give; and God obviously gives it to us and to those who are like us, not to *them!*” “Our great nation can only remain great if we take care of our own, and keep-out the riff-raff!” But here’s the thing: in the Divine Realm that Jesus envisions and embodies, there are no “us” and “them” - there is only One Human Family. And the overflowing love and bountiful blessing of our Divine, Creative Source is to be shared by all people!

Just as “there is still more light and truth to break-forth from the Holy Word”, so there are still more new and creative ways to express and show that Divine Love and Blessing. So today, in honor of our early Pilgrim ancestors, you and I in *this* United Church of Christ congregation continue to listen for ways that *God is Still Speaking* to us and through us! Today, we welcome *all* to share together at the Communion Table, regardless of their faith background or tradition.

Today, and every Sunday, the front of our bulletin contains an Affirmation of Welcome that intentionally names those group or people who are often not welcome or affirmed by faith communities. Today you and I strive to embody Christ's unity and inclusion, compassion and kindness, giving and forgiving - by coming together as One Family to praise and give thanks to our One Creative Source.