

LIVING AS PILGRIMS – November 20, 2016 – Heritage Sunday

Scripture: Colossians 1:11-20 (17)

Unison : the Covenant of North Congregational Church (print in bulletin)

Hymns: 1) 422 “Come, O Thankful People, Come” 2)376 “God, We Thank You For Our People”
3) 494 “We Who Would Valiant Be”

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: By the tender mercy of God, dawn is breaking, light has come.

People: Blessed be the Lord.

L: By the gracious care of our Shepherd, the scattered are gathered, the lost are found.

P: Holy is our God.

L: By the loving reign of the Prince of Peace, the weak are strengthened, the destroyer flees.

P: Gentle is our King, who reigns in glory forever.

INVOCATION AND LORD’S PRAYER

King of glory, as you shine your light into the darkness of our lives, guide our feet in the way of peace. As you shepherd your people, gather the lost and scattered into the safety of your flock. Rule in our hearts as you do in the heavens, so that we may walk our pilgrim way in this life with patience and fortitude, loving and serving you all our days. We pray in the name of Jesus: “Our Father...”

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THE SERMON

Another day with multiple events—and yet, they are all about the One Thing, God and Us.

Puritans/Pilgrims – our Heritage celebration. Christ the King – end of the Christian year, proclaiming the lordship of the risen Christ. And Thanksgiving, which gathers in so much of the other two. As does our reading today from the letter to the Colossians, with its calling to intentional living, to invitational living: celebrating God’s invitation to us, and ours to others.

THE SOURCES I RELIED ON: all in church library too: Arthur Rouner, *The Congregational Way of Life*, 1960; John Von Rohr *The Shaping of American Congregationalism* 1992; Manfred Kohl, *Congregationalism in America*, 1977.

PILGRIMS/PURITANS - Called themselves “saints”, looking at this scripture: “Sharing in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Colossians 1:12). Their belief was that sainthood was not something that some church government proclaimed and authorized, but rather was a matter of being God’s dedicated person in the world, called by God to do the work begun by Jesus Christ. They saw their own sainthood, and that of the church they were founding, the Congregational Way, as a charge from God to be that lamp on a stand, that city built on a hill, that Jesus described in the sermon on the mount. Their exemplary lives, their way of truth, they believed, would be a beacon for the whole world of a better way to be together. This was not to earn salvation—that had already been given, at least to them, in their eyes—but instead to respond with integrity to the great calling of God. In their case it also led them to excesses: a neurotic search for the signs of their sainted status, and for signs that they had somehow strayed. Their quest for perfection in this way made them intolerant of people who followed Jesus in another way, particularly the Quakers and Baptists, as well as intolerant of imperfect people. This often led them to regrettable excesses. We remember this about them, and it’s a cautionary reminder: but at its heart, when it was not colored by human desire for authority and control, Puritanism was ideally about freeing every person to live and act and worship and shine in the world as God’s person.

For us, **this idea of the gathered saints means that we are always seeking to follow where God is leading us**, to follow Jesus in word and deed, not to earn merit, but rather in thankfulness for the way God has loved and redeemed us. And we have the right to this view, as John Robinson, the minister of the Pilgrims reminded them when they sailed and he could not, “If God should reveal anything to them by any other instrument of his, to be ready to receive it, as ever they were to receive any truth by his ministry. **For he was very confident that the lord had more truth and light to break out of his Holy Word.**” (*Rouner, 1960, p. 5*) That’s what we do here, as we come together to study, to learn, to serve, to live and discuss and test and share in community—to look for the light God is always pouring into the world for the sake of the world.

In that same vein, the regard for the order of the church and the role the church would play in their lives, the Puritans and all Congregationalists since then affirm **Christ as the Great Head of the Church** – Colossians 1:17 -- The quest for freedom, the church order that rejected supervisors such as popes and cardinals and bishops and judicatories—was because **they believed they should have freedom so that CHRIST could tell them what to do**, show them the way, rather than any political entity or earthly power. This was the basis of their church order: all Congregational Churches are gathered by the Holy Spirit, combining a collection of

personalities and gifts for the sake of the unique contribution that each particular gathered body could and can and will make in the world. The Savoy declaration of 1658, which laid out the full basis of Congregational church organization and government and practice—a collection of things known under the unifying term “Polity”, affirmed the centrality of Christ with no room for doubt: “by the appointment of the Father all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner in the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head thereof.”

It's sometimes said that Congregationalism doesn't have any core beliefs, that we are “nothing-arians” -- but that's not so. **THIS is what we believe, that we are at our very essential core of being and gathering, followers of Jesus, joined together by a covenanted set of promises among ourselves and between ourselves and God.** We read the North Church covenant for our unison today; we are gathered around the study and enactment of the Great Commandment, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. We are members—of the church as the Body of Christ—members like an arm or a leg are members of a body—and members that way of one another as well.

Now what all this means to us when we celebrate the lordship of Christ is that we really always are Pilgrims, always undertaking sacred journeys into the everyday reality of our lives, where we will also perceive and express the divine truth of God's love and care. Of God's gracious acceptance of us all. Of God's creating us to be in community so that we might be filled with truth and light and share it with the world. **We are not aimless wanderers—pilgrims never are—we are always on a sacred journey in this life.**

As we journey, we always have hopeful expectation—the kind we will begin again next week as we start Advent—that God has come into the world and is ALWAYS coming into the world. That God is seeking to redeem the entire world. That God is **invitational**—inviting us to perceive and then join in this work for peace and justice and reconciliation and compassion, this work of grace. Inviting all people to a life of gratitude.

Which closes the circle back around to **THANKSGIVING**, doesn't it?

This day is set aside as a civic holiday, but is based in a set of experiences that, as I've just discussed, have profound theological implications for us as Congregationalists. I love Thanksgiving....so wonderful to think of a day set aside to just experience gratitude. To share food with one another. To come together, and then to share outwards with all the programs and community meals that take place on this day. That original thanksgiving actually was part of a regular practice for the Pilgrims—not just a special celebration but a harvest festival, **a reminder again that God is God, that God is in charge, and in Christ we have been brought into unity with God and with one another.** For us in these days, there are challenges—people

at our tables this year may have some very major points of disagreement—but there is also the promise that even in the most difficult times—such as the Civil War when this day of Thanksgiving really became a national practice of all Americans—even in those times, there is a greater good that draws us together and then invites us, just as we are, onto a pilgrim way, journeying with God towards truth and light.

So we take traditions and combine them with our current lived reality. The five grains of corn that I did with the children starts as a reminder—how they had nearly starved to death! But becomes something much more memorable than saying to our children, “OK eat your food, think of those starving children!” Guilt tripping is not a path on the pilgrim way. Not for them back then—when the Puritans engaged in it, they found themselves at odds with God’s will—and not for us now either. Instead, **we are called to live in INVITATIONAL ways, ways that reflect the light and life God intends for all people and welcomes all people in. Ways that affirm that Jesus is Lord, that his teachings are the guide for our lives, and that there is always, always, more truth and light that God has ready to break into our lives.**

May you find your pilgrim way and walk it alongside all the rest of us, this Thanksgiving and always.