

Americans and Pilgrims

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
The Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
The Sunday next before Independence Day
June 30, 2013

Matthew 5:1-16; Hebrews 11:8-10

“For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” -- Hebrews 11:10

In 1630, William Bradford began writing the history of the colony of which he was governor. He and his fellow travelers had landed on the shores of North America ten years earlier, and they named their settlement Plymouth, after the English port from which they had departed on September 16, 1620.

Laboring in his off hours, Bradford worked on his history, which he called simply *Of Plymouth Plantation*, for the next twenty years, bequeathing to us, his spiritual descendants, the fullest eyewitness account of those 102 people enshrined in our history and mythology as the Pilgrims.

It was Bradford himself who first called them that -- “they knew they were pilgrims” is the famous phrase he used in his journal – but neither he nor they had any conception that their lives, adventures, and hardships would become the stuff of scholarship, legend, and school pageants. The Pilgrims, as we know them, are the product of history and myth-making, the twin processes by which groups construct identities for themselves.

And this coming Thursday is the day set aside annually when we Americans reflect on and further construct our identity. What does it mean to be an American? What does democracy mean? What does freedom mean? Where did it come from? How are we using it? How are we abusing it? Who has it and who doesn’t? Will it last? Can it last?

If we’re sensible and sensitive people, those are the sorts of questions we will be asking ourselves when we celebrate our 237th birthday later this week. And those are the sorts of questions we ask ourselves – or should ask ourselves – whenever we celebrate our nationhood.

And, again, if we’re sensible and sensitive, we should recognize that the answers we give ourselves to those questions will be provisional at best, subject to revision as history carries us in its current. We know, for example, that what freedom meant in 1776 is not what freedom means today.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” the framers of the Declaration of Independence wrote, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

What was self-evident to those wealthy white guys – that those created equal, for example, did not include women, slaves, or poor people – is no longer evident, let alone self-evident, to us. Times change, things change, people change, their expectations change, and what was once good or even great can become oppressive, destructive, and

evil.

“Time makes ancient good uncouth,” is the way James Russell Lowell put it in his poem protesting the Mexican-American war, and the fact that we know that we cannot and should not live in the past is all the evidence we need to realize that we are not only Americans but we are also pilgrims – pilgrims of the sort described by the book of Hebrews when it talks about Abraham.

Abraham is the pilgrim par excellence: the one called by God to leave this place – this place of familiarity and comfort and security – and journey to that place which is unknown to Abraham but very well known to God. That place of unknown people, unknown landscapes, unknown languages, unknown customs. That place that may appear frightening or undesirable. The place, perhaps, where demons dwell.

And no pilgrim would go there except that they hear a call – a voice calling them from this to something better; for along with whatever demons there may be there is also a land flowing with milk and honey. There, where God calls us, is promise, there is potential, there is something better.

That’s why Hebrews lifts up Abraham as our pilgrim ancestor, and why I lift up our pilgrim ancestors at Plymouth on this day celebrating independence and identity. The pilgrim, by definition, is not yet what or where the pilgrim aspires to be. The pilgrim is en route from this to something better than this. Pilgrims are people of hope, of longing, of not-yet.

We are pilgrim people in this country because we know we have and have not arrived. We celebrate and celebrate rightly the vistas, the potentialities, the possibilities that opened up for those Pilgrims who stepped ashore so long ago on New England’s craggy coast, but the continuation of the task they began lay not with them but with us. It is our calling and our mission to build an America, as we sing in another patriotic hymn, “undimmed by human tears.”

And we know that there are plenty of tears in the America we live in today. Tears as a result of poverty. Tears as a result of racism. Tears as a result of disenfranchisement. Tears mourning the blood and treasure we have sacrificed in wars without end.

Those tears are the proof of our pilgrimage, of the enormous work that remains to be done. In the wealthiest nation on earth, fifty million of us are hungry and need assistance to survive. How can that be? It can be not because of wealth but rather because of how badly we have allowed wealth to be accumulated and hoarded. It is not wealth distribution that’s the problem; it’s the lack of wealth distribution that has allowed fewer and fewer to get richer and richer while more and more sink, in terms of real dollars and real buying power, closer to the bottom, and more and more fall out of the middle class into poverty.

That’s how hunger happens in the world’s wealthiest nation. That’s how poverty traps generation after generation in hopelessness and violence. That’s how we are laying the groundwork now, in terms of childhood obesity and a host of other medical problems, for a health care crisis just a few years away.

There is a ferocious battle underway in our country between those who see the builders and makers of our future to be leaders who put more wealth and more power in the hands of the already wealthy and powerful, and those who see the builder and maker of our future to be the God who sent the prophet Amos to condemn the maldistribution of wealth he saw in his day, eight centuries before Jesus. It is not a matter of indifference to the writers of the Bible that there are a few who have more than they need or can ever reasonably use while millions suffer because they do not have – and will never be able to get – enough. That is unjust, plain and simple, and no justifications about the free

marketplace or laissez-faire capitalism or entrepreneurship will ever make injustice justice.

We have work to do, you and I, Americans and pilgrims that we are, as we journey with our father Abraham toward that city whose builder and maker is God. Let us not be so naïve as to think that we will reach it in this life because we won't, for history is not the realm of God. Human history is tragic because its brokenness can never be healed from within. We are healed, if we are healed at all, because we allow ourselves to be made new by God. We allow ourselves to be transformed by the grace and mercy and peace of God, and thereby to be delivered from the hells of our own making. That is what it means to be saved.

A changed world starts with changed people -- "Be the change you want to see" as the bumper sticker puts it -- and people are changed not when they try real hard to change themselves but rather when they allow themselves to be changed by God. In our tradition self-mastery follows only from self-surrender, surrendering to a love which is holy, infinite, and eternal.

We Americans love to think we can change the world, and indeed we can, but first we must change ourselves. We must change from being "rich in things and poor in soul" as we'll sing in a few minutes and begin storing up for ourselves those treasures in heaven that Jesus identified so clearly and easily for us: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

The measure of our greatness, fellow Americans and fellow pilgrims, is how we care, not how we dominate, destroy, or ignore. The foundations upon which we build have been laid for us by God and shown to us in the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ. We have everything we need but the will to answer the call. May our prayer for ourselves and our country be for that will, that courage, and that great love.

Let us pray. Almighty and most merciful God, we pray for our nation and for all nations of the earth. Grant wisdom, courage, and mercy to those who lead; and honor, fidelity, and generosity to those who follow. Keep this nation, we humbly pray, under your care, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth. These things we ask through Christ, our Lord. Amen.