

Mayflower Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, May 26, 2024 10:00am
Rev. Howard K. Bell
The Desire to Please God

Today, in this very moment, we are all part of a beloved community – gathered here in this sanctuary, whether in person or by livestream. This beloved community also includes those who have participated in the nearly ninety-nine years of our church’s history. We are all blessed by this history. May the memories of the dedication and service of those members who have died continue to guide and strengthen us today and in the coming year as we plan to honor and celebrate our one hundredth anniversary, and as we look forward to creatively discerning the next one hundred years!

By your participation in worship, you are joining with this beloved community on a spiritual journey. When we gather in worship, when we gather in justice-seeking, when we gather in peace-making, when we gather in congregational care, when we gather in care for God’s creation, when we gather in learning, and when we gather in service - we experience our communal spiritual journey. Our Mayflower Church mission statement affirms that we are on a collective and personal journey along the Jesus path moving us toward justice.

My inspiration for the first part of this sermon comes from Rev. Michael Piazza. He is a United Church of Christ pastor, author and church consultant. He also writes a daily email meditation titled: “Liberating Word”. His meditation from May 6 this year, reads: *“Yesterday, I preached about what it means when our denomination says, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” It is a wonderful statement of unconditional welcome, but the part of the statement I focused on in my sermon was the reminder we are all on a journey. The challenge I posed was to decide if we are spiritual tourists, settlers, or pilgrims.*¹

As I read this mediation, my heart, mind and spirit resonated with these three distinctive terms for understanding our spiritual journey: Tourists, Settlers or Pilgrims. Piazza offers these definitions: *“Tourists want their journey to be easy, comfortable, and fun. (We all experience that on our travel journeys, hopefully.) Settlers believe they have made it to their destination, think they know all they need to learn, and live with made-up-minds. Pilgrims journey seeking meaning, purpose, and transformation, even in the inevitable challenges of life.*² I love this positive association with the term pilgrim.

However, let us reflect for a few minutes on the aspects of the term settler as it applies to the colonialism that preceded and followed the arrival of the Mayflower ship to America.

¹ <https://myemail-api.constantcontact.com/Liberating-Word--Tourist--Settler--or-Pilgrim-.html?soid=1102983385787&aid=jMapPulPLmo>

²ibid

I share a personal story of my relationship to the term settler. It begins with my birth and childhood experience in Southwestern Pennsylvania. I grew up with many positive associations of the early settlers of America. My hometown was the location of The Whiskey Rebellion. My father was a proud member of the “Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) – and subsequently, I also joined the SAR paving the path for my descendants who may choose to claim this heritage.

I participate in the genealogy site, “Family Search”. One day, I was notified that I may be – but not yet proven - a direct descendent of Mayflower passenger, Edward Doty. I found myself with mixed emotions upon being informed of this possibility, since I recognized that even though there was some pride in this history there was also the reality that Mayflower passengers and others who came later participated in the assault and annihilation of the indigenous Native Americans who already were settlers on the land that they were now attempting to occupy. My personal research confirmed that I am also a direct descendent of a man who served under Patrick Henry in pre-revolutionary times to murder and extricate the Indians forcing their migration from Pennsylvania westward into Ohio and beyond. When we did our anti-racism study, I asked Jodi Pfaff why I did not know about this. She said, “Well they were all gone, forcefully.” I learned that many of my ancestors were slave holders. I have found it necessary to acknowledge that along my personal genealogical journey I have had to hold on to not only the emotion of pride but also hold on to the emotions of shame and guilt.

How does the term settler relate to our communal journey? Participating in the “What’s in a Name” process for the last year has educated me in a number of ways. I have learned that the negative associations with aspects of colonialism associated with the name Mayflower serve as a blockade to many whom we wish to include in our radical welcome. Even though the evidence is necessarily anecdotal, the confirmation of the stories we heard in the Readers Theater and in the many listening sessions conducted by the “What’s in a Name” Committee reveal that this negative association with the name Mayflower, may be far more pervasive than I had ever considered. I know that many people here share these concerns. I also know that I, and many others also believe that there are many positive associations with the people from the Mayflower, and also many positive associations with the name Mayflower associated with the ninety-nine years of our church’s history. May our discernment process continue as we consider ourselves Pilgrims seeking meaning and inspiration moving forward.

The scripture that I chose for today are words ascribed to the Apostle Paul addressed to the early church in Rome. May we also read this text as addressed to us today. Verse 9 reads: *“Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.”* (Romans 12: 9) This verse

calls us to be genuine in love. Commentator David Bartlett offers the definition of “genuine love” as “non-hypocritical love”.³ May we all seek to love non-hypocritically.

In regard to hating what is evil and holding fast to what is good, David Bartlett also offers these insights: *“Much as we might wish that the distinctions between evil and good were immediately and intuitively clear, we know that this is a call to us as individuals and as church communities to think together about the complicated ways in which good and evil are at work among us.”*⁴ Paul is calling us to careful discernment. This is not an easy assignment. Self-awareness is required as well as a sincere desire – as pilgrims – to seek meaning, purpose and transformation.

Commentator Rochelle Stackhouse also writes: *“Like the Ten Commandments, (these verses function) as the structure, the core values on which all the activities and ministries of the church, and of individual Christians, are built. The more complicated parts of this text concern our relationships with those we find hard to love. (Got any of those?) This passage is not a greeting card slogan but a call to costly discipleship.”*⁵ May we hear this call today.

Our scripture continues: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit. (Romans 12:11) “Live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:16) “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12:18) May all of us be guided by these and the other exhortations that resonate with you in today’s text. I think Bartlett says there were 23 exhortations in what was read.

I affirm that as we now seek to move into the pilgrimage that is our next one hundred years, we need to learn what we can from our history, and we need to seek to journey on the Jesus Path in ways that are – to the best of our ability – pleasing to God!

What might it mean to desire to please God?

A short story of how I learned of The Pilgrim’s Prayer by Thomas Merton. Rev. Tom George was a UCC minister colleague of mine as well as a close friend. Tom died in 2016. Before his death he handed me a copy of Merton’s “A Pilgrim’s Prayer” and asked that I read it at his Celebration of Life service. Upon my first read, I did not fully understand its meaning, nor had I had the opportunity to discuss with Tom its meaning to him. It was immediately after his death as I prepared to read it for his service, that I came to understand and appreciate this prayer more fully - especially these lines: *“I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really*

³ David L. Bartlett [“Exegetical Perspective on Romans 12:9–21.”](#) in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Rochelle A. Stackhouse [“Pastoral Perspective on Romans 12:9–21.”](#) in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011),

know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing it. But I believe that the desire to please you (the desire itself) does in fact please you.”⁶

In preparing this sermon, this prayer also came into my heart and my mind as we attempt to imagine the next one-hundred years for this church. We do not know where we are going. We do not know by what name we shall be called. I believe Merton’s prayer is inviting us to live in this uncertainty.

I encourage all of us that, central to our process, should be the question of what name might please God. Merton also reminds us that even when we seek to know what name might please God, it is not possible for us to know that the name we choose, or will choose, in fact will be pleasing to God. Nevertheless, Merton reassures us that the desire to choose a name pleasing to God, that desire does please God.

So, how are we to discern what might please God in our personal spiritual journeys and in our communal spiritual journey over the next one-hundred years? A few suggestions: Let us covenant to follow the exhortations from the Apostle Paul in today’s text.

Let us look at the cover of today’s bulletin and Ram Das’s quote. I did not have time to fit all of this into the sermon, but there was a suggestion that our spiritual journey is a journey of returning home – that we end where we began – embraced by God! Ram Das’s quote is: “Life is a journey where we are walking each other ‘home’ to our true selves”. I met Ram Das during my career and the one thing I remember that he said in his one day all-Saturday retreat is his exhortation: “trust yourself”.

Let us covenant to, like Pilgrims – to seek meaning, purpose, and transformation. Let us covenant to live out our mission to journey along the Jesus path moving us toward justice. Let us covenant that we shall desire to please God in all that we do. May it be so. Amen.

⁶ <https://reflections.yale.edu/article/seize-day-vocation-calling-work/merton-prayer>