

“All in The Same Boat”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
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*Community Thanksgiving*

Thanksgiving – for many Americans, has come to mean  
an opportunity to gather as a family for  
a big turkey dinner with all the fixings.  
And don't forget the football game – and don't forget the cleaning up.  
We also have this vague idea of what that First Thanksgiving  
was like for the European Pilgrims and the Native Americans  
who sat down together for such a feast.

But this sentimental view of such a bucolic setting  
is offset by the sharp focus of a catastrophic war that broke out  
54 years later between their descendants.  
King Phillip's War was named after Metacomet whose nickname was 'King Phillip'  
and he was the son of Massasoit, the leader of the Wampanoags  
who first befriended the Pilgrims.

Men, women, and children were killed indiscriminately or died from deprivation  
in terms of hundreds of whites and thousands of Indians.  
It was virtually the end of the presence of Native American tribal life  
in southern New England and opened the way for European colonization.  
It was the defining war for what would be the pattern for the next 200 years  
in the contest for this land from the Atlantic, westward to the Pacific...

So, it wouldn't be so hard to imagine by the 1800s in the Old West,  
what happened when the Lone Ranger and Tonto  
rode into the Little Big Horn Valley,  
and found themselves surrounded  
by thousands of Dakota Sioux warriors waiting in ambush  
for Custer and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry – it was not a good situation.  
The Lone Ranger turns to Tonto and says, “What are we going to do?”  
And Tonto replies, “Who's this 'we', Kemosabe?”

How could things have been different? What *could* have happened?  
What does that early encounter between  
the English people of Plymouth and  
the Wampanoag people of Pokanoket  
still have to teach us?

Willard, p.2

The Pilgrim colony was to be a plantation and a religious enclave  
of a Christian sect that broke away from both  
the Anglican 'Church of England' and the Calvinist Puritans.

They made landfall on Cape Cod and later settled  
at site in a protected bay they named "Plymouth"  
after the coastal town they departed from in England.

They were a mix of spiritual 'pilgrims' as well as secular merchants and soldiers  
who agreed to form a 'civil body politic'.

They arrived in the New World in late November of 1620 –  
which was not a good time of year to set up a colony.

It was too late to plant seeds and many of them were already sick  
after their 2 month sea voyage aboard the Mayflower.  
By March, half of them were dead.

At first, there had been no sign of the Native people  
when the Pilgrims landed at the northern end of Cape Cod.

While foraging for food, they came upon an abandoned Indian village  
and stole some corn and looted some graves.

Later, they were attacked by Indians, trading bullets and arrows,  
yet with no casualties on either side.

They got back into the Mayflower and crossed the bay  
to establish their permanent settlement at Plymouth.

Now the Pilgrims were not the first white people to come to New England –  
there'd been regular fishing expeditions,  
perhaps since the time of the Vikings.

But in recent memory for the Wampanoags,  
there'd been abductions of their people by Englishmen into slavery  
and killings;

And now once again, there was violence between these newcomers and them.

Now we usually imagine the Indians hiding out in a forest,  
staring in awe at European boats that must have seemed to them  
like wooden islands with masts like trees and sails like clouds.

But one day – in the very early spring and at great risk,  
a Native boldly walked out of the forest towards the Pilgrims' encampment  
and to the astonishment of the English colonists, he said,  
"Greetings, Englishmen!" – in English.

This man was called Samoset, a visiting chief from what is now Maine,  
who came to speak as an emissary of Massasoit,  
the chief of the Wampanoags of Pokanoket.

Willard, p.3

Samoset had learned to speak English from English-speaking fishermen,  
and after he was invited into the compound with some suspicion,  
the first thing he asked for was, “Beer.”

He was allowed to leave, but soon after, returned with a man named Squanto  
who spoke flawless English because he had been enslaved  
and lived several years in London.

And it was Squanto who taught the Pilgrims  
how to plant seeds of corn and fertilize them with small fish.

Soon after, they were visited by Massasoit himself and a reciprocal agreement  
was established between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags.

This peace treaty was put to the test soon after when  
Massasoit was kidnapped by the Narragansetts.

The Pilgrims sent half their able bodied men –  
a raiding party of 10, along with Native guides to rescue him.

What happened was clumsy, but effective –  
They burst into a large wigwam in the middle of the night,  
terrifying the men, women, and children there –  
only to find Massasoit had already been released.

But this proved to be a good show of force  
that won the respect of the surrounding tribes.

So, it was under these circumstances that the First Thanksgiving took place  
with about 100 Natives and 50 Europeans gathering for a three day festival –  
a harvest festival like Sukkoth and Pentecost.

We don't know exactly what was on the menu,  
but there was very likely venison, seal, and lobster, along with wild turkey,  
boiled pumpkins, corn, peas, carrots, beans, cranberries,  
as well as duck, goose, codfish, eel, clams – and even beer.

Historian Nathaniel Philbrick wrote,

“There were profound differences between the Pilgrims and the Pokanokets  
to be sure – especially when it came to  
technology, culture, and spiritual beliefs –  
but in the early years,  
when an alliance appeared to be in both their best interests,  
the two peoples had more in common than  
is generally appreciated today.

For the Pilgrims, some of whom had slept in a wigwam  
and all of whom enjoyed eating and drinking  
during that First Thanksgiving, these [Native people]...  
were human beings, much like themselves.’

Willard, p.4

The peace between them lasted 54 years – until the passing of Massasoit, but even that time had been marred by treachery and violent forays. Trouble brewed as the younger generations eyed each others' land; the Natives wanted their land back and the Puritan immigrants – who eventually absorbed the Pilgrims, wanted the rest of the land. War broke out when these two groups believed they didn't need each other – and that's the lesson: we really are "all in the same boat".

The Pilgrims are part of the heritage of the United Church of Christ – and the Pilgrims' legacy has been a mixture of tolerance and discord. But what has become significant for our faith community in recent years, has been to reclaim the words of the Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson, as a message that still has something to say to us all in our time. After praying all night with them on the eve of their departure to the New World, Pastor John Robinson sent the Pilgrims out with this blessing:

*"I Charge you before God and his blessed angels  
that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow Christ.  
If God reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His,  
be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth from my ministry,  
for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light  
yet to break forth from His holy word.*

*The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond  
what Luther saw.  
Whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin,  
they (the Lutherans) will rather die than embrace it;  
and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left  
by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things.  
This is a misery much to be lamented.*

*For though [Luther and Calvin] were precious shining lights in their time,  
yet God has not revealed his whole will to them.  
And were they now living,  
they would be as ready and willing to embrace further light,  
as they had received."*

Willard, p.5

How can things be different in our time? What *can* happen between us?

What does that early encounter between  
the people of Plymouth and the people of Pokanoket  
still have to teach us?

Amen