

## "PILGRIMS' PROGRESS" Thanksgiving Sunday, TFBC, 11/23/08

In 1678 from the Bedfordshire Jail came a little book now considered by most scholars "the most influential book ever written in the English language!" John Bunyan wrote about a simple everyday man named Christian who, terribly burdened by his sin, left his home to find his destiny with salvation. He set out on the journey of a lifetime for the "Celestial City," the place where he would finally be freed from the burden of his sinful, wasted life.

You know the book, it is Pilgrim's Progress. It is the story of all of us in our various joys and hardships, climbing the road to our final place of salvation. Just as John Bunyan's Christian, we all walk the road that begins with faith and hope and progress upward to the necessary virtues and charity to be fit for heaven.

Jesus tells stories just like this to illustrate his points as well. In a parable of 2 sons the father asked each one to go to the vineyard to work. One said all the right things but did not go. The other fussed, whined and dragged his feet. But he eventually did go to do His father's wishes.

Jesus spoke the obvious when he asked, "Which one BELIEVED?" In Jesus' language, it is obvious that Jesus views believing with greater depth than most of us. He sees believing 2 ways, as TAKING GOD'S WORD SERIOUSLY and DOING WHAT HE SAYS.

Our American origins begin with the first pilgrims who took seriously and followed what God was saying to them. They landed here in 1620 for the freedom from persecution for taking God's word seriously and doing or living as God had called them! They might have been naive or idealistic, but their sturdiness is a lesson to us about the value of trying to do what is right. As

pilgrims, we, too, must progress from TALKING about God's Kingdom to SERVING God as Jesus taught us.

II. The Pilgrims were devout men and women of God who gave thanks to their loving, caring Father in the midst of all sorts of conditions. They understood the meaning of thanksgiving in the fullest Biblical sense. They trusted that The Lord was with them, and since He was, He would sustain them. "The Lord is with us in all our ways," they wrote, "for which let his holy name have the praise forever, to all posterity."

Their progress was the key to their survival. As they gathered together to ask the Lord's blessings, they spread a feast on those first thanksgiving tables of America. They were serving God as they set this table. They had 2 essential ingredients to set the table. We would be wise to set our tables with these 2 also.

The first is **HUMILITY**. They landed on a new continent of unknown soils and variety of growth. They had to learn from others in order to survive. That is what they did with genuine humility. We speak with reservation about this virtue with no small measure of concern today. Humility is not held as a virtue in many circles, especially if it means you are required to stuff your own feelings and opinions and swallow what someone else has to say. You never can tell when someone is out there to take advantage of you, we think! We have our rights!

But humility is an essential virtue. It is the ability to learn from other people, even those that make you feel most threatened, and who may in fact take advantage of you. You learn not from some need to survive like the pilgrims, but because you want to grow, you want to become all that God has created you to be. You learn because it more important to grow than to protect your pride.

Jesus was humble. He had enough humility to stand before a jeering crowd of soldiers, priests and an accusing mob and never return the insult. This was his life, to learn and to follow His Heavenly Father. When He prayed in deepest agony at Gethsemane, he showed how deeply he dreaded the circumstances he was given, but he obeyed. That was his life; that was his essential humility.

We can set our tables this Thursday with Humility because we want to learn from Jesus. As Paul said, we want to be like Jesus now, so we can be like him in eternity! We are willing to suffer with him now, so we may rise with him in Heaven. Humility is to learn what we need to know to be like Jesus, and to learn these lessons from every person God has put us in relationship with, every circumstance God has ordained or allowed to come our way.

The second virtue the first Pilgrims used for setting their table was **GENEROSITY**. The pilgrims shared what they had with the Indians. It was an act of thanking their neighbors for teaching them the ways of planting new and strange crops in a foreign land. But they didn't have to do it. This was their offering to God, their obedience to Jesus' words. "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me!" They took those words to heart! They shared what they had.

When we take God's word to heart we have all the instructions for our happiness that we need. \*We are told to give and it will be given unto us. \*We are instructed to forgive, first, not wait for someone to forgive us. \*We are taught to be kind to one another as God in Christ has shown kindness to us, \*to love just exactly like he has loved us! We do not wait for a signal, or for another to open the door, or for the perfect moment! \*We go as Jesus went about doing good. #It is the recipe for our happiness in The Lord!

#It is the job description of a Christian! #It is the identity of those who belong to him, who have the hope of eternity!

Is it a tall order? To a proud people it might sound completely impossible, but His words are life! To know and learn to love His word is to experience life to the fullest, to discover every day that He holds the key to life, and though we have a lot to learn, He will give us the instruction if we just trust in him every day and follow him faithfully.

Set your table with Generosity and you will never eat alone, you will never be troubled about the meaning of life or the purpose of your own life. You will be in His Presence every moment, as he said, for if we do it to the least, we do it to him. He will be there when we set the table with the Humility to learn from others and the Generosity to share what we have with them, too. Just like the Pilgrims, we will bow in thankfulness because we will feel his constant Presence, his blessings, his deepest assurances in life.

I have watched us inch up the preparations for Christmas earlier and earlier every year. It is a practical matter, we say! It is because the merchants have found the holidays of Christmas to be so lucrative, that Thanksgiving doesn't hold a candle to its rich benefits. That's right, Thanksgiving won't fill our pockets, it fills our hearts as we empty our pockets for His sake.

The pilgrims were good models for us. They never forgot that God was with them. Because of that, they became more and more like Him. They are our forefathers, the founding fathers of our nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

**How will you set your table this year?** Let me suggest that we try something new this year. Let's set an empty chair at our tables, one that can remind us of Christ Jesus as the unseen Guest at our tables. It just may help you remember that He

promised never to leave you, and that he calls you to be like him in every way, WITH HUMILITY AND GENEROSITY.

We may have outgrown playing Pilgrims and Indians, but we shall never outgrow serving in the courts of our Heavenly Father, especially at THANKSGIVING.

End

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