

“Thanksgiving Festival”

Delivered by Barbara Prose

At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, November 20, 2011

The time: 1620.

The place: The ship *Mayflower*, after it crossed the Atlantic Ocean, coming from England to the New World.

The situation: The Pilgrims, our religious ancestors, discovered they're off the coast of Cape Cod, instead of off the coast of Virginia, where they thought they were headed. They realize their charter from the King is now invalid: once they step on dry land, there will be no rules, no system of laws to guide them or keep them safe. Without the King's charter, people will be free – free to pursue their own self-interest without restraint. They smelled freedom ahead and were excited, and they were wise enough to be fearful too.

And so they made a covenant, a sacred promise called The Mayflower Compact. In that compact, our ancestors promised they would place the public good over private interests. In that moment of great uncertainty, anchored offshore, our religious ancestors affirmed they were not only seeking freedom from something – religious persecution – but committed themselves to seeking freedom for something, a new way of being together in community.

As John Winthrop said a few years later, “The only way to avoid...shipwreck is...to be knit together in this work as one [body]. We must entertain each other in brotherly and sisterly affection.” (He didn't say sisterly, but we can trust his good intention) “We must uphold a familiar commerce,” he said, “together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other...” As the seeds of democracy were planted and took root, he affirmed, “If one member suffers, all suffer with it, if one be in honor, all rejoice with it...the ligaments of this body which knit together are love...no body can be perfect which wants (or lacks) its proper ligament – love.”

The time: one month ago.

The place: Jackson Elementary School.

The situation: Three Reading Buddies showed up today. The kids are so excited. Each class wants to know if they could have a Reading Buddy too; kids are begging for Buddies. There's a shift in attitudes about having a Reading Buddy. This is amazing to witness.

At the same time, more and more families are telling our volunteers they can't make ends meet. More and more children are coming to school without a snack or lunch, without a heavy jacket, without good shoes on their feet. Parents and grandparents are asking for our help to provide the basics for their children. Families are worried there won't be a way to put a turkey on the table for Thanksgiving dinner.

The time: is now.

The place: All Souls.

The situation: For more than sixty years, our church family has celebrated a Festival of Thanksgiving at this time of year. Our children have carried produce from our nation's farms and gardens up onto the chancel, so we can share the great bounties of the earth with those who are in need. This year, as Marlin announced and you can see, we're gathering not only fruits and vegetables but canned goods and staple foods. By coming together and staying committed, the families in our adopted schools will be able to put a turkey on their table next week.

This chancel, full of the bounty of the earth, reminds us of both the abundance and the absence of food and community all around us. Our religious ancestors knew the power of a people united in a common cause. You and I know the power of a people who make and keep their promises. As Americans, we know the power of a people who are one nation, under God, indivisible. A people who believe in liberty and justice for all.

As John Winthrop preached almost four hundred years ago, the way to avoid shipwreck is to be the love that has knit us together, as ligaments are knit into our very bodies. This is our great covenant, to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another. So it has been for almost four hundred years. So may it be for the next four hundred years to come.

Please remain seated and sing as our children now come forward.