

Over Unknown Horizons

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First Parish in Plymouth, MA

April 18, 2010

Sprinkled in and among the many meetings and dinners we've had together this week, I also spent time feverishly reading book after book about the Plymouth, the Pilgrims and First Parish. I was certainly very familiar with the story being a good Massachusetts schoolboy, and like many people, I read Nathaniel Philbrick's book about Plymouth that came out a few years ago. Through all the tales of the heartfelt send off by John Robinson, the frightening and frustrating voyage, landfall at Plymouth Rock, the event that stands out most for me is one that we often overlook. At just about this week, in 1621, the *Mayflower* set sail to return to England. Jones, her master, had stayed as long as he could. The ship and crew that had been the Pilgrim's help and refuge were going. As one historian said, the Pilgrims could only watch the *Mayflower's* departure through their tears. It's amazing to look back and not wonder why none of the Pilgrims, if not the whole lot of them, didn't go home to England with the ship. Already half their number had died, the land and harbor were not ideal, and a lot of work was left to be done to make Plymouth a livable place. With the *Mayflower* gone and no other ship expected soon, they had committed to the unknown, to a future over a distant and scary horizon.

Standing together this morning, I'm struck by how appropriate this moment in history is to us. I have seen, felt and experienced First Parish as a committed, spirit-filled, though somewhat depleted and unsure community. Like the plantation on the day that the *Mayflower* sailed away, First Parish's survivable and sustainability are not certain. All of us gathered today perhaps sense in our bones, if not know in our minds, that a great deal of work lies ahead. I've heard of and felt hurts, disappointments, fears and sense of scarcity. As your candidate, it's been important for me to hear these things, and I've been humbled to be entrusted with them. If I am called as your settled minister, it will be vital for me to lift these up and work to heal them.

Yet, I can imagine what else I might have heard from those Plymouth settlers in that April 390 years ago. What I believe I would have heard is also what has impressed me and endeared me to all of you this week. Faith in each other and faith in this community to bind together to transcend the immediate challenges and rise above. Excitement at the possibilities of each other, your new ministry and the town of Plymouth. Pride in your identity and history and pride in what you have accomplished in keeping First Parish moving forward. I've felt that excitement and hope, seen it in your eyes, heard it in your voices. On the brink of voting to call another settled minister to be your spiritual and religious leader, First Parish, all of you, is making the same bold and hopeful decision that the Pilgrim forebears made to stay on this hill while the

Mayflower sailed. You are saying “yes, yes indeed” to the congregation and community you love.

First Parish’s Pilgrim past isn’t only a source of positive inspiration and identity. As an historian of New England congregationalism, Margaret Bendroth, recently wrote: “The past isn’t past. . . . Congregations are all haunted by the past [even after hundreds of years.] . . . [T]he past plays an important, often unarticulated role in creating the present-day realities of religious institutions. Memories survive in different ways, sometimes as a deep undercurrent of sadness and disappointment, sometimes as a tendency toward suspicion of outsiders or as a resentment of authority.”

This week has driven home to me that you are aware in many ways of both the pride and the burden of your historical and unique past. How do we maintain the Meetinghouse? Or do we even bother? Do we have a responsibility to preserve the Meetinghouse for the town, the nation, the *Mayflower* descendents, or for people who will probably never worship with us here as Unitarian Universalists? There may yet be many other ways that the “dead hand of the past weighs heavily” (A. Hussey) which may not be so obvious. Perhaps in the way First Parish relates to its ministers or the larger world beyond its massive wooden doors.

The words of our opening hymn this morning: “No longer forward nor behind I look in hope and fear/ but grateful take the good I find/ the best of now and here.” My vision for the ministry and future of First Parish is one of vitality that embraces and reflects on both the good and the bad that history has bequeathed to us. (Bendroth). My vision for First Parish would be to hold the past gracefully, ever learning and being inspired by it, without succumbing to its burden. My vision for First Parish is to live hopefully into its future while also being able to celebrate and enjoy its present; in essence to stand never entirely forward nor behind.

My hope and dream for First Parish would be one of openness to each other and to the public. The future of First Parish, I believe, lies in shedding the Pilgrim legacy of just needing to survive, living merely for the sake of existing. The first meetinghouse was a fort, a place where a community and a religious tradition needed to cluster to protect itself. In the years to come, let First Parish tear down the walls of the fort (figuratively or literally). Become an evolving and expanding public church that welcomes change and Strangers from the outside at the same time it speaks to tradition. Become a place of abundance, not scarcity. This is a fear-filled movement, I know, one that calls on us to have faith that there is more spirit, energy, money and time than we might now feel we have. I’ve felt that abundance simmering under the surface. Let First Parish take that leap. Let the safe and protecting *Mayflower* that still looms in memory set sail and trust that you can do more than survive, that you can thrive.

Like the drop of dew in the rain forest that is said to be able to create a hurricane half way across the world, the movement from fear and scarcity to spirit and abundance may start in the smallest ways. Today's Story for All Ages talks about how one thing of beauty can spark miraculous transformation. That story was important for me to include today, since it captured some of the spirit shared with me this week, how more than one person related that taking the rug out of Kendall Hall represented much of what is good and possible in First Parish. In the various voices that shared that story with me, I heard a celebration of community, willingness to face change and even respect for tradition. These moments beget more moments, and I pray that the future of First Parish holds more of them.

Before I end, let me tell you about another ship. The sailing ship *Hercules* set sail from Plymouth, England at the end of November, 1636. The *Hercules*, commanded by William Chappell, was one of what we might call "North Atlantic ferries" that shuttled to and from New England during the Great Puritan Migration that began with our very own Pilgrims in 1620. The *Hercules* in fact had just returned from Plymouth Colony only 18 months earlier, bringing a new group of Puritan settlers escaping oppression by King Charles I. The 1636 voyage took over 70 days before the ship reached the Maine coast on February 13, 1637.

We've heard the accounts of how brutal the *Mayflower's* journey was in the late summer just 16 years before, so we can imagine that the *Hercules'* journey across the North Atlantic during winter was equally terrifying, though no account remains to tell us that tale. Unlike the *Mayflower*, most of the 65 souls aboard the *Hercules* were bound for the fishing settlement at Richmond Island near Cape Elizabeth, Maine. Among those 65 passengers was my first American ancestor, John Libby, who settled on Richmond Island under a three-year contract to fish for a Plymouth merchant named Trelawney.

I don't know why John Libby or his fellow passengers made such a perilous winter crossing to America. Perhaps the relative success of the settlements here at Plymouth and in Boston and Salem, inspired them to believe that the economic opportunity was worth the risk to life, limb and family. Looking back through centuries, I find it hard to imagine that traveling beyond the unknown horizon of the North Atlantic to a barren wilderness was the better choice than trying to make a go of it in a well-established land such as England. He had no need to escape persecution, no grand plan to establish a Godly society, nor even an established community of people to trust and on whom to rely. Maybe someone made a good sales pitch to old John Libby, an offer he couldn't refuse. Though he might not have called this a leap of faith, it certainly was.

I tell this story in part to tell you a bit more about me. But, I also share this story this morning to say that I realize that I am also an heir to the legacy of our founding families. In my view, it's not an inheritance that bequeathed wealth or status. No. For our purposes today, the story of John Libby is a reminder to me that I too carry in my

bones that mix of hope and fear that comes with traveling toward and over unknown horizons. It is a reminder in ministry to innovate, to take risks, and to continue to listen for and respond to ever new revelation, while honoring my roots.

Thank you for this week. My blessings to all of you today and in the future.