

“REMEMBERING”

Sermon by the Rev. Richard G. Leavitt. On: September 25, 2016. At: The Congregational Church of Amherst, NH (UCC). Texts: Genesis 17:1-8; 1 Thess. 1:1-7. (Anniversary kickoff – 275 years since this congregation was gathered on September 22, 1741.)

Most of us living today have a deep ambivalence about the past and about history in general. On the one hand we're fascinated by old things and old places. We cherish our current church building, constructed in 1774. And we keep as much of the original architecture and flavor of the meeting house as we can. We frame old pew rental charts listing where each family once sat. We place in glass cases all kinds of artifacts and records, including a fragment of the dossal cloth which once hung behind the elevated pulpit from 1836-1874. In the records closet there's a Sunday School hymn book from 1884, and a children's scripture-question book belonging to someone named Anna Kent, dating from 1857. Some of what we choose to keep is historically valuable, but a lot of things we keep just because we don't know what else to do with them, and besides, it's cool having that stuff around. Especially in New England, we're very proud of our Pilgrim and Puritan roots. We preserve artifacts and documents, creating museums, identifying historic places with plaques. And especially in historic Amherst Village, we remodel with an eye for the preservation of what we've been told is authentic to a particular period.

As a culture though, we're also pretty impatient and intolerant with history. Old things are boring, historians are wordy, and the past is largely irrelevant. It's a small percentage of folks who just love to pore over old documents and long ago diaries. We've got better things to do. We want to clean up and throw out the old, knock down the dilapidated, buy or build new and efficient. Newer, bigger, better, faster. In today's modern world, aside from a brief nod to history, we haven't got time for quaint. Can you imagine someone choosing to saddle up their horse and buggy to ride to church instead of hopping in the car? Who among us today would choose to read by candlelight and write with a quill pen and ink bottle instead of turning on the overhead light and pulling out our ballpoint? Our parsonage still has a two-seater outhouse at the rear of the shed. But I don't think either of its current residents uses it very regularly.

Yes, we have deep ambivalence about the past. But that doesn't mean we should reject everything older than five years. Nor should we keep everything just because it's old. Whether it's stuff in the closets or out-dated attitudes and ideas, indiscriminate saving is just hoarding. Things don't really hold any value if we don't know why it is we're hanging onto them. And attitudes become stubborn and calcified if they're held just because we don't want to change.

Just this past week we marked the 275th anniversary of the gathering of our church, and the ordination of its first minister, The Rev. Daniel Wilkins. I spent some extra time in prayer on Thursday, giving thanks for him and for the others who gathered with him to be the church. That day in 1741 was a mighty significant occasion for those of us who call this congregation home, for our town, and for this region of the country. Along with the five other men who were also willing to sign the original church covenant, Daniel Wilkins dedicated his life to the worship and service of God in this place. He ended up serving this church for 42 years as its first pastor. He wasn't brought in from outside the community. He was part of the settlement to begin with. But he was a graduate of Harvard College and a respected leader and a man of faith. A number of ordinary folks couldn't even read at that time and even fewer had formal education. And so it was that he was tapped to serve God and this community all those years ago.

Now we don't have a lot of records or specifics today about Daniel Wilkins and those others who signed the first church covenant. We're fortunate even to know their names. And we only have a few historical accounts of those first years in this parish of Souhegan West, as it was once called. We know even less about the hearts and minds and motivations of those early founders. Why did some choose to sign the covenant and others hold back? Were there sacrifices involved with signing on? What did they imagine would happen to their church and town over the next five years? Over the next 50 years? It's hard to know for sure. And yet history is important. It informs the present, and it shapes the future. And thankfully it helps cure spiritual myopia where the only thing that matters is today and what we see here and now.

The exploration of history can be tricky, however, because it's easy to romanticize or over-criticize the past. And it's very tempting to make observations and judgments from our modern perspective. Although we don't have a lot of specific records from our Amherst forebears, we do know quite a lot about the Puritans of that time period. From today's vantage, it's easy to be critical of their old-fashioned attitudes which we might consider judgmental or severe, moralistic or rigid, in fact a bit, well...Puritanical. It's important, however, to study the times as they might have understood things in their day.

What did the Puritans believe? They believed that by fulfilling their obligations to the Creator--as described in the Bible--God would bless them. Failure to fulfill those obligations would anger God and result in punishment. Everything they said or did, therefore, was held up for God's inspection. How they handled hardship and suffering, but also how they received celebration and joy, was understood in the light of God. Birth and Death happened according to God's plan. Their individual desire didn't matter much except as it magnified the will of God. And their expectation as Christians was to live in such a way that anything and everything they did would reflect their faith and evidence their redemption in the Lord Jesus Christ. What they found delightful was God's grace. And what they lived out was the manifestation of that blessed assurance in the Lord.

We think of the social mores and rules of the Puritans as repressive compared to our individual freedoms today. But we must remember that they considered those things necessary in a society that was starting over in this new world. Conformity to certain social norms was critical. They needed moral structure to shape community life. For certain undesirable behaviors like swearing, drunkenness, idleness, gambling, flirting or gossiping, they needed church discipline, sometimes imposing fines, shunning the offender, or forcing the person to spend a few hours in the stocks on the town common. It was an incentive for offenders to change their ways and an example for others in the community not to stray.

So, aside from some of the more negative attributes we might associate with the Puritans, what are some of the more positive contributions we can claim from our ancestors in the faith? One thing for sure is the concept of covenant in their church life. A covenant is not a contract. A covenant is a promise made with others and with God. It's a sacred agreement. When Daniel Wilkins and the others came together to form a church in this place, they signed on to uphold some sacred promises in their life together. It didn't matter so much what they believed individually. Everything was for the good of the community. And they gave up individual freedoms to honor the whole.

The Puritans were also non-creedal. They left behind the orthodox creeds of the Anglican Church when they came to the New World. They were seeking what they considered pure religion—thus the term Puritans. It was almost unthinkable in those days that someone would not believe in God, and God’s Divine Will. But it wasn’t professing a creed that made you a faithful Christian. It was how you lived that mattered. And when a brother or sister stumbled or fell, he or she was brought back into line by the stern discipline of the community, but also by the loving embrace of that same community when they repented and renounced their waywardness. The original church covenant talks about the “mortification of sins.” That’s a theological term that refers to quenching one’s fleshly desires. While punishment for succumbing to carnal temptations could be harsh, it was essential for returning someone to the right moral path.

Another gift of our Puritan forebears is the promise to raise up all in their charge to the nurture and admonition of the Lord. What does that mean? In short, it means that they modeled the faithful life to their children and to all in their household. Conversion was not the primary focus of the Puritans so much as nurturing all those in their care. Children would hopefully grow up to become faithful adults in the community simply as a natural extension of what they had heard and seen from their elders. It’s why today in our tradition we don’t often speak about the date we accepted Jesus Christ and when we found personal salvation. Salvation is more of a process that happens in community. That process explains in part why we continue to offer educational opportunities and spiritual enrichment for every age and stage from cradle to grave. We’re always learning, growing, being nurtured in our faith.

Anniversaries help us remember the past. It’s not particularly helpful just to be nostalgic, however. The past is not always worthy or wonderful. Our ancestors did not always behave in ways that honored all God’s people. We shouldn’t rush to judgment, but neither should we worship them. The past shapes us today, sometimes in reaction to the rigid attitudes of our forebears. In all of this, it matters how we tell our story. One of my colleagues who went on to become a conference minister in our denomination told me this: Congregations that focus on the past as the good old days tend to live in some amount of spiritual denial. While congregations that look at the past and stress their perseverance through hardship and the tremendous joy they experienced by overcoming it are well equipped for the future. It takes honesty and integrity to wrestle with the whole truth of our past, the good, the bad, and the in between. But when we do, our history expands who we are and who we can become.

Friends, we are part of a great cloud of witnesses today. We honor the faithful witness of our forebears, even as we forgive their shortcomings. And we hope and pray that future generations will be as kind to us in their assessment of our faith and service. Happy anniversary to us! And glory be to God! Amen.

Genesis 17:1-8

INTRO: *The Lord God makes a covenant with Abram in the twilight of his life. A covenant is a spiritual promise. He is to walk humbly in obedience to God and God will reward him with children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, more than anyone can count. This is incredibly good news for Abram and Sarai who have no children for their inheritance. The land of Canaan will be his to develop and inhabit, as well, the Promised Land for all his descendants. With this covenant, Abram is offered a new identity. From this time forward, he will be called Abraham, which means "Father of a Multitude". Listen to the terms of this covenant in the Book of Genesis, and listen for the Word of God...*

17When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty;* walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.'³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram,* but your name shall be Abraham;* for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring* after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.'

1 Thessalonians 1:1-7

INTRO: *The Apostle Paul founded many churches across Asia and Eastern Europe. But it was difficult for him to keep close connection with these folks when he couldn't be with them in person. So, he wrote letters to many of these congregations, which kept his memory of them, and their memory of him, alive and well. Their deep faith, their labor in love, and their abiding hope are an inspiration for him personally but also for the many other churches facing similar challenges as they live out the gospel. Remembering is a spiritual discipline. It connects us with those we love and do not want to lose, across the ages and despite the miles. Listen to the words of Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians, and listen for the Word of God...*

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters* beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.