

TO BE A PILGRIM

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Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Hebrews 11:13

When it comes to names Congregational churches have not shown much imagination. Most commonly they have gone in for place names, deriving the label of the congregation from that of a city, a street or a neighborhood. I always have thought that one of the more unfortunate names of this sort is the Country Club Congregational Church in Kansas City.

Another device has been numerical names. Only a few of our churches have cared to be called "Second" or "Third." But literally thousands have been proud to be called "First" even though they are the only Congregational church for miles around.

Some time around the middle of the last century some people began to feel that place names and numerical names were rather sterile. It happened that about this time the nation was looking back to its roots and in the process rediscovered an obscure group of Congregational settlers whom they called "The Pilgrim Fathers." So then we began to get "Plymouth Congregational" churches and "Mayflower Congregational" churches and of course, "Pilgrim Congregational" churches.

In Superior they even have a Pilgrim Lutheran Church. At one point we planned to take that up with the U.S. Patent Office. Then we discovered how convenient it was to have some of our mail sent their way. They don't know it yet, but Pilgrim Lutheran Church paid the bill for painting our sanctuary last year.

Well, if we are going to call ourselves "Pilgrim Church," that ought to tell something more about us than "First" or "Second." The name ought to say who we are. In saying that it ought to do more than tie us historically to the Plymouth Colony people. It ought to help us see ourselves as those Plymouth Colony people saw themselves when they described themselves as Pilgrims. They were thinking of that passage in the letter to the Hebrews where the author compares the Christian life to that of the ancient patriarchs who lived by the hope of a promised land.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on earth.

So the King James version reads. Modern translations tend to use another word than "pilgrim", probably because "pilgrim" has taken on the special meaning of a person traveling to a sacred shrine. Modern translations come up with such phrases as "strangers and exiles," "foreigners and refugees", "strangers and passing travelers." The word "pilgrim" is so rich in its heritage of metaphors that it is impossible for any other single word to tell us what it means.

As a start in saying who we are as Pilgrims, however, I should like to begin with such a single word. It is the word transient. At one time we might have used the term "sojourner." That is the word our older English Bibles use to express the pilgrim idea in the Old Testament. The ancient

Hebrews were a nomadic people who lived in tents. They would sojourn in one area for a while and then when the pasture grew sparse or danger threatened they would move on to the next oasis. Later on they sojourned for long stretches in the Land of Goshen and in the Sinai desert until at last they came into the promised land. Once there, they passed special laws protecting foreigners who sojourned among them.

"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land," says the book of Leviticus, "you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

There is one of the high water marks of ancient law. How often in this modern land of immigrants and migrants we have fallen short of it.

But "sojourner" is no longer a going word with us. That is why I suggest the word "transient." Does this describe us?

Most churches today are composed of transients in a very literal way. That is true of this church. In the seven years that I have been here more than two hundred people, including confirmation classes, have become members of this church. Among these a considerable number were people newly moved to the community. The great majority of those people already have moved away again. Many of the confirmands are gone, and most will leave the area in a few years. Even the old guard is transient. They all move on to Tucson, Arizona.

We are a society of transients. Our churches are churches of transients. It is important to recognize this about ourselves. We should minister to one another as people who experience both the rich variety and the nagging loss of the nomadic life. In the church it is our task to say to one another, "You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." (Ephesians 2:19)

The root of our English word, "pilgrim," means "foreigner." There is another sense today in which we find ourselves transients in a foreign land. This sense has to do more with time than with place. We live in times of unprecedented change. That scares us. When we hear Bob Brenning speak of coming developments in genetics we wish we were back there with the Pilgrim Fathers. Harsh weather, suspicious Indians and scurvy...at least, we are familiar with those challenges.

But it is not just the degree of change, it is the kind of change that makes us feel as if the earth on which we sojourn has suddenly become part of another constellation. It is change that undercuts the most basic human relationships, change that scatters to the winds our own cherished values and best insights into living. If I were to describe the mood of many people today, including my own, I would say it is a mood of bewilderment. This alien planet seems to have become a meteor hell bent. We reach out for something to hold on to. Perhaps that is another reason why as pilgrims we find ourselves in church.

Then there is that transience that is central to the human condition in all ages. Have you ever had a letter returned with the envelope marked, "deceased"? That happened to me recently, but since I did not know the addressee personally, I was not jolted too much. But two years ago we received back a Christmas card marked that way and that did jolt me.

"Deceased" meant that Erica was dead. More than that it meant that a family I had known all my life, a family of three generations, were all gone.

Henry, my father's classmate, Erica his German-born wife, Erica's mother, whom we all called "Grossmutter," Hank, lost in the Pacific during World War II, - I barely remember him, for he was some years older than I. And Frisky, whose substitute brother I think I became for a while and who was for me the sister I never had. All gone!

Some day, I tell myself, I shall make a pilgrimage to an island off the coast of Maine, to the cottage where the Teals found their peace. There on the porch will be Grossmutter shelling peas and talking German to my mother, who listens patiently and answers carefully in English. And Henry will stand there with his unflappable good-nature, looking out philosophically at the absurdities of my generation. And I shall carry Frisky's easel and Frisky's paint brushes, and Frisky's blanket and Frisky's guitar down to the rocks, for she made us work for the grace she brought us. Then as the soul of that island she will lead us in singing, "On the Top of Old Smoky" and "Money, Marbles and Chalk" and possibly "The Wayfaring Stranger":

I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger
Traveling through this world of woe.

Pilgrims. Transients. We are that certainly. The church is a gathering of transients who confess they are transients. It is a good name for us.

But the word "transient" does not tell the whole story about us pilgrims. If it did tell the whole story another word might describe our situation even better, the word "hobo." A hobo is a transient who is not going anywhere.

We must admit that description does fit a lot of us much of the time. It points to the characteristic spirit of contemporary culture. If someone wants to write an illuminating term paper for the UMD Sociology Department or the Music Department, one might trace the hobo theme in popular music from "King of the Road" to "Gentle on My Mind" through all the truck driver songs down to whatever is there among the top forty at this moment.

"Moment" is also a key word here. That is what people in a hobo culture live for. Since they are not going anywhere there is no connection between the moments. And that being the case there are no long-term commitments, no abiding responsibilities. Which is to say, there is no morality. And no faith either. And no hope.

If living as transients told the whole story about pilgrims, then to be a pilgrim would be to live like that. But clearly this is not the whole story. Think of Abraham, the author of Hebrews urges us, "By faith he so-journed in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

Those nomads who are our spiritual forebears, the writer reminds us, were not aimless vagabonds. They lived as if they had a destination. Which is to say, they lived by faith in the promise of the future. So it should be, he implies, with us.

What is this promise? What is this city that God has prepared? Are its foundations laid in this world?

Many pilgrims who went before us did not think much of that possibility. Jonathan Edwards once preached a sermon called, "The Christian Pilgrim" on this same text from Hebrews. In that sermon he argues that the only point to this world is that it is meant to be a place of preparation for another.

"All that God has given us," he said, "is given to this purpose."

The sun shines, and the rain falls upon us; and the earth yields her increase to us for this end. Civil, ecclesiastical, and family affairs, and all our personal concerns, are designed and ordered in subordination to a future world, by the maker and disposer of all things. To this end they ought to be subordinated by us.

We have rebelled against that way of thinking. Yes, we have. You have rebelled; I have rebelled. The spirit of modern times and by and large the spirit of the modern church has rebelled. "We must cherish God's good creation here and now. We must seek the kingdom precisely within the workings of civil, ecclesiastical and family affairs." Such is the emphasis of our contemporary creed.

If we took that creed seriously, we would be pilgrims. We would not run in terror from the earth's own future, or take refuge in a hobo existence of living for the moment only. If we were pilgrims we would trust the promises of God for this world. We would say to one another, "If our knowledge could unite with justice and love, if our power could be guided by self-discipline and mutual responsibility, we might lay another set of foundations for life in this world." We would find in the church a place to inspire and train us to those ends.

If we greeted from afar God's promise for humanity here and now we would be pilgrims.

But perhaps there is a promise as well beyond this world. We liberated moderns splash the cold waters of doubt on all other-worldly dreams. But we cannot doubt the longing for a better country within ourselves. We think the most godly souls are precisely those who feel most at home in this world. In a sense that is true. He who lives closest to God is most at one with God's gift of life in space and time.

Still, I suspect the most godly souls are also precisely those who appreciate the force of Jonathan Edward's declaration:

It was never designed by God that this world should be our home.

There is a hankering in the depths of us for eternity, a lingering homesickness that no way station in this life can heal. There is a longing in the spirit to burst the seams of the flesh and to see past both the tragedy and the comedy of our mortal existence to that harmony which lies beyond grief and beyond laughter.

Call the dream an illusion. But do not doubt the homesickness, for then you doubt the pilgrim spirit in yourself.

If we would be pilgrims, perhaps the time again has come when we should at the very least stop expurgating that phrase, "heavenly city," from our text. We need not deny the promise of this world in order to greet from afar the possibility of a fuller destiny.

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Who are we? Places cannot say, numbers even less. "Pilgrims" says more. Often we wonder where we pilgrims are going. In all the long centuries have we come anywhere at all? Still, it is remarkable, isn't it, that after all this time we should still come together because an unemployed carpenter walked out of the hills and said to us, "Follow me."