

“FIVE LITTLE KERNELS OF CORN...”

Text: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the Will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”
I Thessalonians 5:16-17

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Sharon Presbyterian Church
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The incident which opens our sermon today took place 385 years ago, but it has often been repeated through the years, here in Charlotte and across the land, more so as we come to winter. It gets bad enough in the land of the free and the home of the brave, but it is far worse in most other stations and places on the planet, especially in Africa and Asia. It is a story about hunger, at Thanksgiving time. Let me tell you about it.

The verifiable origins of the first American Thanksgiving are lost on the misty flats of long ago. Sound historical scholarship records a bone fide Thanksgiving Celebration in St. Augustine, Florida, as early as 1565; then a second one in Berkeley Plantation, Virginia, on May 14, 1607. Pity for the sunny Floridians and staunch Virginians, but our enduring attachment to sentimental traditions and our flare for the dramatic will hear to nothing else but that the first Thanksgiving took place at Plymouth, Massachusetts, with the Pilgrims and Indians happily gathered around a huge table on November 29, 1623. That dating is historically accurate by the way, a National Holiday to celebrate our plenty. But what I want you to gaze in wonder about this morning is that the celebration arose out of a vivid memory of hunger.

Our sermon is titled “Five Little Kernels of Corn.” Let me tell you why. The first winter the Pilgrims spent in New England was dreadful. They arrived on November 11, 1620, at Provincetown all the way around on the other side of Cape Cod. They finally came across to the mainland. Crossing the Great Atlantic Ocean was a chore, and during the winter months which followed, half of them died of disease and most of the others nearly died from starvation. As the first Governor of the Colony, William Bradford, told the story in his published diary, Of Plimouth Plantation: “The Mayflower left England on September 16th with 102 passengers, plus a crew of unknown number....After they had enjoyed fair winds and weather, they encountered a storm during which one of the main beams in the mid-ships was bowed and cracked, which put them in some fear that the ship could not be able to perform the voyage.” But on they went ... and they made it.

“Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element...” While they were still anchored in the Bay, they signed the famous Mayflower Compact, which declared their faith in freedom and in God. Gov. Bradford told the saddest stories in his diary, but he never mentioned that his dear wife, Dorothy May, committed suicide, or perhaps just fell mysteriously overboard and drowned, while the ship was still at anchor. No one knows why.

“Being now passed the vast ocean,” (Nathaniel Norton is writing) “and a sea of troubles before them, they had no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh them, no houses, much less towns, to repair unto to seek for succour; and the season was winter sharp and violent, subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search unknown coasts.” (“The Desolate Wilderness,” an editorial by Nathaniel Norton, published each Thanksgiving in the Wall Street Journal.)

There was a bleak little harvest in store when they approached that first brutal winter. But in the time and providence of God they eventually got their bearings. English speaking Squanto and Somoset, members of the nearby Wampanoag Indian Tribe, who had learned to speak English by the way, while they were slaves back in London, taught them how to fish and farm the coastal area. They all worked diligently through that year, and by the time another autumn came, by now it is 1623, they

managed a decent and reasonably productive harvest. They decided to celebrate with a Festival, not unlike their own Churches had back home, and not entirely unlike our Harvest Festival here.

Thoughtfully the Pilgrim Fathers invited their two Indian friends, along with the Wampanoag Chief Massasoit, and their families, to join them for the celebration. Not so thoughtfully, the men did not inform their wives about the invitation. The Indians came; but Indian families being what they were, unknown to the Pilgrim Fathers, some 90 plus Indian extended family members turned up for supper. There were only four able bodied women there to cook the meal; (Talk about husbands and their invited guests, “uninvited” would be more accurate.) Since the food and the wine were not all that plentiful, the accommodating Indian Chief took pity and sent some of his braves back to the tribal land, and returned with an ample supply of meat and drink for all. The party lasted three days. Say no more...and there was not one football game for the Indians to amuse the men-folk of the colony!

We preachers usually chide congregations at Thanksgiving to remember the abundance of blessings we have received, and condescendingly we often refer to how unfortunate the pitiful poor and needy are, like real red-blooded Americans are not. In the process we make those who are worried and troubled with ailments of the body, mind or soul feel guilty because they are not in the most thankful of moods. The alternate point I make today is to ask you to remember that Thanksgiving began in the memory of a previous hunger and a realistic fear of losing everything. It is not an easy holiday for many of them who were recalling loved ones lost and the after effects of disease, and most still homesick for England.

Each of you received five little kernels of corn as you came into the Sanctuary. In their first winter in the New World, at one point all they had for a full day's provisions were Five Little Kernels of Corn, just like the little bagful you have in your hands, minus the plastic bag. Somehow, by the grace of God, they made it, or most of them did. Apparently there was enough substance in those little kernels of corn to get them through the night.

So, when things got better and they prepared for their feast of bread and fowl and beans and wine, Governor Bradford told his helpers to shuck some corn and strip the kernels off a dozen ears or so. Then he had them place five kernels of corn at the top of each place-setting at the table, and he preached them the following little sermon, paraphrased: “These five little kernels of corn are to remind you of last year and the year before when five kernels was all we had for our daily provision. In our plenty, remember our poverty and hunger; and remember those around the earth who have no food today. And remember, it could happen to us all again. Amen.”

Today in Charlotte, and across the land, we have our financial troubles and other worries all around us. Some are out of work, and more worry for the same. Let us remember before the Lord, how blessed and fortunate we are. We have an abundance of food and drink today. But there was a time when our forefathers and some of us in wartime and in peace did not. My mother used to say that “Some years are better than others.” And that day could come again. And, there are countless fellow human beings, children of God all over the world, and some within shouting distance of this sanctuary, who will subsist today on not much more than five little kernels of corn.

I have an old friend in Scotland who once told me that as a child he dreamed of going to America to find his fortune out there where all things were possible. In time his own life and his responsibilities

to his parents, then his sister, then his wife and children prevented him from coming over to the States. Some years later he recalled his dream for me at lunch. He repeated that for years and years he was sorry about the family misfortunes which had kept him in Dundee. But then he looked up at me and said meekly, "But Richard, while once I wanted to go there, now that I see what's happening, I'm glad I didn't go." What happened? What happened to the American Dream? Who took it away? Let me answer with another Thanksgiving story, from Plymouth, Massachusetts.

I have been to Plymouth Plantation in New England time and again over the years. The first time I was there I was excited to see Plymouth Rock, the stalwart landing place where the Mayflower put in, which I had heard about from childhood. I was expecting something grand and huge like the Rock of Gibraltar. I could not find it.

By the way, the landing at a rock in Plymouth is not recorded in any contemporary account by the original exploration party. It is never mentioned by Gov. Bradford in any of his writings, either. Suspiciously, it was all the way to 1741 before the Rock at Plymouth was identified as "The place where our forefathers landed." Elder John Faunce, being interviewed when he was 91 years of age, was the only one on record who remembered standing on the Rock.

In his historical study John F. Rhodes tells of the day he first visited Plymouth, expecting as I did to find an impressive stone rising along the shore. Instead, he found a little bathtub-sized rock encased in a wooden box, more like a coffin than the pivotal entrance into the New World. (John F. Rhodes, quoted in the *Maine Herald*, November 22, 1990) Rhodes writes that he assumed that a hurricane or some huge cataclysmic storm had carried it away, or possibly it just eroded from the relentless pounding of heavy seas and salt water. However, he discovered that was not the case. I quote: "It used to be a huge rock. But people have been chipping away at it for hundreds of years. (Are you listening?) "Chipping away at it." It has been moved and broken at least a dozen times and people carried the scattered pieces all over the world."

At the beginning, the Rock was pretty much a non-event. The Pilgrims were too busy with other things, I guess, like survival. For thousands of years it had been there undisturbed, likely a granite deposit from the last ice age. Then came the Pilgrims in 1620 and there went the Rock! What a story: In 1771, for example, five years before the Revolution, some businessmen decided to promote tourism and built a wharf over the rock, leaving a huge opening in the middle where the rock protruded up through the slats" - which people could pay to come and see.

In 1774 another group of Patriots decided to move the Rock up to Meeting House Square where still more people would visit. No one really knows who authorized the move, but as they tried to lift Plymouth Rock, it fell and broke into two pieces. The Patriots decided that the top part, on which the Pilgrims presumably stood, was the more important half. So, they loaded it onto a cart and transported it up to Meeting House Square in the town, where they dragged it up next to a huge elm tree. Absent mindedly, they left the other half unprotected back down under the wharf.

In 1834, some of the good folk decided that the half Rock up town would be safer inside Pilgrim Hall than outside in Meeting House Square; and besides it would bring more fee paying tourists into the museum. Meanwhile, as they tried to move the bottom half up to join it, they dropped it and it smashed into dozens of little pieces and fragments. (The Mayflower movers hadn't learned much in 65 years.) Passersby collected the loose pieces, and the two largest pieces were dragged up to the museum at Pilgrim Hall.

Later an architect was hired to design a canopy to protect what was left on the beach. But his drawing provided for too small a covering. Rather than pay the architect to redesign it, they chipped and chopped the edges of the Rock off to make it fit. And now, the Rock on which America was founded, ninety feet long in 1620, and down to thirty feet in 1715, is now a pint sized rock about the size of a bath tub. Only the Lilliputians could have landed on it!

The Rock, or pieces of it are everywhere. In England, in Nevada, in Australia, in Texas even. A 50-pound block of the rock rests inside the original Plymouth Congregational Church in Framingham, Massachusetts. That's nice. Thankfully, a chunk of the rock is enshrined in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. But smaller bits and pieces were stolen away by thousands of curiosity seekers and collectors. They now reside who-knows-where, in drawers or jewelry boxes all round the nation. A former parishioner gave me a little piece of the Rock 40 years ago; he asked me to protect and preserve it for he was growing older: it is sad, but I can't find it anymore. And a merchant in Plymouth once tried to sell me a pair of cuff-links made from the original Rock, or that was what he told me.

The point is (Are you listening?) that the Rock on which America was founded was not destroyed by foreign despots; it was not stolen and carried away by our enemies; nor was it taken back by the forces of nature - it was whittled away by neglect and carelessness, and by well-intended and devoted God-fearing American citizens. As Professor Rhodes writes in conclusion: "Those who desired to get a piece of the Rock for themselves destroyed its large and proud beginning."

Now you have been patient dear people. I am already on page 8 of my manuscript and we have only just completed the introduction. A wonderful lady here at the church wrote to me a few weeks ago and said: "I like your stories; but I wish you were more spiritual and Biblical in your sermons." Thank you. I wish I was too. I often slip the sermon in and around the stories. Once in a while I draw them out clearly and directly. So, if you came for a sermon, here it is, in three points:

Point Number One: As with the Pilgrims, life can be tough. The days and decades can force you out into a desolate wilderness. Once they crossed over to the New World, they had to keep on with the program. There was no turning back. Poor Mrs. Bradford, the Governor's wife, did not survive. Others succumbed to the weather and despair and to new diseases. But, those who survived put their faces to the wind and their faith in God, even when they did not know where they were going. You have to live the life you have, not the one you wanted. If you aren't going to live it, what are you going to do with it?

Some go down in shrapnel;
Some go down in flames;
But most just die by inches,
Playing little games.

Point Number Two: nobody ever made a conscious decision to let the original Rock perish. It just happened. Right? Wrong. It didn't just happen. It was deliberate, even if was sometimes innocent in intent. The Rock was moved around for commercial gain; they wanted to make money off of it to enrich themselves. Others chipped piece after piece away so they could have a little souvenir for themselves. They didn't mean to hurt anybody. We hear it all the time: "It really doesn't matter

what I do, so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else." Right? Wrong! It does matter; what you do does matter. When you chip a little piece off the rock, it hurts the rock and everybody else. You can chip away the moral fabric and rock of a nation just as surely as a rock. This doesn't matter; that doesn't matter. A little cheat here does not matter. But it does! It's like litter on the landscape: The paper cup I throw casually out the window of my car doesn't matter much by itself; and the plastic bottle I toss in the rubbish doesn't do much to hurt the environment by itself; but added to 400 million other moments of carelessness, it becomes an awful clutter in a beautiful valley!

Point Three: be faithful to Christ and as St. Paul writes in Thessalonians, "live a life pleasing to God." Those are the words of the Scripture Lesson for today. Paul is writing to his fellow Christians in a dark and difficult time, not only in the world, but of their own making in the Church. So he says, "What's wrong with you? Have you forgotten your obligations to the Lord? I want you to live at peace among yourselves. I want you to care for each other and for all my children on the earth. I want you to 'encourage the faint hearted and the worried.'"

Some are carrying enormous burdens. Some are weak in faith and discouraged. Some are worried over their bodily health. Others are worrying for a loved one. I want you "to be patient with them all." (Verse 5:14) Someday you will need them to have patience with you.

Help the weak; the strong can take care of themselves. Be like Jesus Christ, who became a servant to all. "Pray without ceasing: give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Your faith is not an individual badge of honor for you; it is a pass-key into the hearts and lives of others. Be faithful wherever you are and your faithfulness will be felt where all the others are. And give thanks: when a person or a nation fails to give thanks, everything else begins to fail too.

I have been a fan of Governor William Bradford for years. He was a remarkable man, noted for the Mayflower Compact which got our nation going, and for his writings. But as leader of the Colony, he had the wisdom and courage of a saint.

"In his later years Gov. Bradford came to believe that the original glory was departing from his home town of Plymouth. It sure wasn't what it used to be. He wrote that they had forgotten how they got there. The town was declining in numbers (It was only 1656). Population was dispersed; young people were indifferent to religion and heedless of their parents' sacrifices." I am still quoting. "He said all the people wanted were their luxuries. They were growing soft, and meanwhile the Indians were growing insolent..." Oh dear, poor William. Times were changing, and he could not stand it! (Of Plimouth Plantation, p. xxvii)

He knew where the strength lay originally. Back in 1623 he had issued the famous Proclamation, the one which called forth the first Thanksgiving Day. It went like this:

A PROCLAMATION

"To All Ye Pilgrims: Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian corn, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game; and inasmuch as He has protected us from the ravages of the savages and has granted us freedom to worship God, now, I your Magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, between the hours of 9 and 11 in the day time, on

Thursday, November ye 29th of the Year of Our Lord 1623; there to listen to ye pastor, and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings. Signed, William Bradford, Ye Governor of ye colony, November, 1623”

I adore the part about “Listen to ye Pastor,” and “render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God.” ‘Thanks’ begins and ends with giving. Praise the Lord - For now and evermore, Amen.