

Special Pilgrim/Thanksgiving Worship Service

*Faith of Our Mothers: Anne Hutchinson*

1 Timothy 2: 1-7; Matthew 6: 25-33

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Thanksgiving has somehow managed to evolve from a simple, straightforward harvest festival celebrating the bounty of the earth, to becoming a lesson in American history through sound bytes. The pilgrims! And the Indians! Celebrating a meal together in racial harmony! And if we're a bit more sophisticated, then we praise the pilgrims for seeing religious freedom and tolerance, and the Indians for welcoming them with open arms, a selective version of our modern American values projected back onto our country's origins. Except it's not exactly true, either then or now. The pilgrims didn't come to the new world for religious freedom: they just wanted to be able to dictate people's religion on their own terms, rather than be dictated to back in the homeland. And by 1620, the Indians had figured these foreigners out. If they could have built a wall to keep these disease-ridden Europeans out, they would have. Sometimes a little history is worse than no history at all.

Yet for all that the pilgrims and the Indians have become caricatures in our modern Thanksgiving decorations, nevertheless they were real people. And the decisions they made had an impact that lasted generations, even up to our present day. That impact is significant for all Americans, no matter how long your ancestors have been here, but it's of particular significance for us in the United Church of Christ, because those pilgrims were the ancestors of the Congregationalists, and the Congregationalists would someday merge with the Christians, the Evangelical and the Reformed to become the United Church of Christ. They contributed to the shaping of who we are as a church to this very day. So for all the hoopla and jingoism of Thanksgiving, let us in the UCC reclaim these spiritual mothers and fathers of ours, for they have both warts and wisdom to share.

For this Thanksgiving Sunday I want to tell the story of one of those intrepid pilgrims. Not one of the first ones that came over on the *Mayflower* and landed at Plymouth Rock, but one of the ones that came a few years later and landed further up the coast in what was then called the Massachusetts Bay Colony and today is known as Boston. Her name was Anne Hutchinson. Has anyone ever heard of her?

She was born in England, the daughter of a dissident Puritan minister. The church in England at the time was run by the state, literally called the Church of England or the Anglican Church. (In America after the revolution the name here would be changed to Episcopalian.) Among other things, having a state church meant that if you crossed the church leadership you were guilty of treason against the government. The Puritans were a movement that didn't think the Church of England was reformed enough. They'd caught the spirit of religious fervor that had been brewing on the European subcontinent ever since Martin Luther had nailed his 95 theses to the door. Above all, they didn't like to just take the word of the priests for it. They wanted to study the Bible and religion for themselves, and even girls could get in on this course of self-education. Even as a child, Anne read extensively in her father's library and formed her own strong opinions on how the Church of England had messed things up. In 1634, she and her husband and their numerous children emigrated from the Babylon of England to the New Jerusalem of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. That's the part of the pilgrim story that we're most familiar with: the quest to find a place where people can worship according to their own conscience and practice their faith freely.

Except that's not the whole story. Because Anne and her family simply moved from one state religion to another. It's just that they liked the religion that was required by law in Massachusetts Bay. If you weren't a Puritan, you could still live there, but you were a sort of second-class citizen. And the boundary between religious leaders and secular leaders was practically non-existent. Church leaders set government policy, and government leaders would punish people for religious violations. So it wasn't about religious freedom so much as it was about the right to write the rules of society on their own terms.

And there's a problem whenever your colony is founded by religious dissidents who rebel against church authority. Because if they've rebelled against one church authority, what's to stop them from rebelling against another church authority? People who insisted on their right to follow their own conscience back in the homeland are not going to suddenly hand their consciences over to the new authorities in the colony. And so it was with Anne Hutchinson. She didn't trust outward authority so much as she trusted her own good judgment, and the only religious leaders she did trust were the ones she happened to agree with.

Not long after arriving in the new world, Anne began holding gatherings of neighboring women in her house to discuss the Sunday sermons. This was all very well and good, and the colony's leaders encouraged this kind of thing because it showed how pious everyone was. And Anne was so knowledgeable that she began to gain a reputation for explaining the sermon and the Bible texts better than the minister had. Soon the women in her group started inviting their husbands and brothers and son to come to meetings as well. The group swelled to over eighty people, far too large to fit into Anne's home anymore, and they had to move their meetings into the church itself.

Now this was starting to get noticed. It was one thing for a woman to teach other women, but for a woman to preside in teaching over a group of men AND women? This was skirting the bounds of propriety! Later critics of Anne would decry these lewd and promiscuous gatherings. Nevertheless, despite this rampant orgy of Bible study, it was more or less tolerated as long as Anne kept her nose clean and didn't stir up trouble.

But then she started daring to criticize some of the local ministers. They weren't preaching and teaching the gospel properly – that is, the way Anne wanted to hear it. And her group became all the more worrisome because it now included the new governor. Remember what I said about how there was no real division between religious and secular authority? So if you've got a woman with her own coalition of eighty people including the governor, all in a colony that numbers several hundred, you're starting to talk about political power. If she's criticizing ministers, she might also start criticizing magistrates, and that's a sizeable chunk of the population that's hanging on her every word. So it was that the colony authorities at last felt things had gone too far, and they hauled her into court and put her on trial.

Bless our modern day and age, when the internet is like a new Gutenberg press! You can now read the transcript of Anne Hutchinson's trial online. I did – and I have to tell you, I've been to seminary and have a master of divinity degree, and I couldn't make hide nor hair out of the arguments. Looking at it from our standpoint today, it's hard for us to see what really was the difference between Anne's beliefs and the official beliefs of the colony. In fact, I'm not sure there was any real significance at all. As a heretic, her beliefs were not all that daring. Some modern folks likewise look to her as a symbol of modern feminism, as if the only reason she got into trouble was because she was a woman. But I'm not convinced by that argument, either. As long as she had submitted to the local authorities, her gatherings were permitted. She got in trouble not because she was a woman, but because she questioned their authority. There were men who did the same thing, and they too ran afoul of the law. Rather, the way her gender played into it was that the leaders based some of

their criticism of her on it. It was easier for them to complain about a woman running a mixed and promiscuous Bible study than it was for them to directly confront the criticisms she leveled against them. And that's what is so fascinating about reading the transcript of the trial. While I couldn't follow the arguments, I could follow the ways in which the court trumped up one flimsy, bogus charge after another, and Anne calmly and coolly shot them all down. What you see in the transcript is a bunch of insecure buffoons facing off against a woman of formidable self-confidence. Well you can imagine, this kind of thing just cannot be borne at all, and it's all the worse that the person making these respected leaders look like imbeciles is a woman! So the court passed sentence, and Anne was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, excommunicated from the Puritan Church.

In an interesting postscript, I had long heard the story of how Harvard University was founded in 1636 to provide an educated clergy for the colonists. What I had never heard before is that it was Anne Hutchinson herself who provided the impetus for it. The leaders were so mortified by the drubbing she gave them in court that they realized they needed to educate their ministers better to avoid such humiliation in the future. And that, my friends, is how Harvard University was founded!

But in Anne's story, just as in the thanksgiving story of the pilgrims and Indians, or indeed in any history, sometimes it seems like we draw conclusions based on our own times rather than understanding how things really were back in the day. Today we are tempted to view Anne as an early feminist, or as a proponent of religious freedom. She was in fact neither, and yet her decisions and actions would prove to be inspirational to succeeding generations of feminists, and proponents of religious freedom. She was not a feminist, but she did set her own conscience over and above that of the educated male leaders of her day. She refused to submit to them simply because they were men. She said she was only obligated to submit to them if they were *right*, and she reserved for herself the right to determine if they were right. It may not have been feminism, but it was definitely an assault on patriarchy.

Nor was she a proponent of religious freedom. She believed there was one correct interpretation, and any other interpretation was false and should be rooted out. The perennial problem, of course, is that people do not all think alike. Even Puritans do not all think alike. There will always be a variety of interpretations. If you focus all your energies on rooting out false doctrine, you will end up whittling your movement down into nothing. All movements have to find ways of incorporating a diversity of views, or else they will die. How then did this narrow-minded band of Puritans eventually give rise to the United Church of Christ, a church so extravagant in its welcome that some critics would say we aren't really a church at all? Some might call that irony. Myself, I prefer to see it as the hand of God. Those Puritans could be narrow-minded and harsh, but they also had a basic sense of fairness and an ability to handle self-criticism. It's entirely possible to be both at the same time. For example, while we all know about the infamous Salem witch hunts, we almost never hear about the number of contemporary Puritan leaders who resoundingly criticized those hunts and pressured Salem to end them.

Sure, the Massachusetts Bay leaders couldn't handle Anne's criticisms and banished her. But over time those leaders had the wisdom to discern how their colony was lessened when she and her followers left. Our ancestors made many choices over the course of the years, some better than others, but over time the trend moved away from that kind of narrow-mindedness, to a broader view that was willing to listen to dissenting viewpoints even when they made us uncomfortable. The result now is a denomination that would never banish anyone, yet in its broad embrace, there are those individual churches that choose rather to leave the denomination. They choose self-exile. That is of course their choice, and we have learned to respect it. But the UCC is lessened when they leave. And just as important, those churches marginalize themselves when they leave. They have the right to do so, but I would say they consign themselves to oblivion.

One other thing I noticed in the transcript of Anne's trial. Again and again she said, "If you prove to me that I have done wrong, then I will submit." She never said the court had no authority over her. She said, rather, that they were using their authority improperly. Unlike our modern dissenters, Anne did not want to leave the colony. She wanted to remain, but she also wanted to be able to practice liberty of conscience, to speak the truth as she felt God had given it to her. I wonder how history might have been different if the leaders had allowed her to remain. How might American history have been different if we had learned earlier how to hold on to our dissenters rather cast them out into exile?

But that's just speculation. The most important legacy of Anne Hutchinson and her like are that we have indeed, however imperfectly, learned to value our dissenters. And as a church, we in the UCC have come to embrace them, and we are the stronger for that. Not all churches agree. Many churches believe it is their religious duty to root out dissenters and keep them from contaminating the fellowship. That's one view. But I'm glad that's not how we in the UCC see it. With extravagant welcome, we can embrace Anne Hutchinson as our foremother, and that is definitely something to celebrate this Thanksgiving.