



**Wisconsin Conference
United Church of Christ**

A Thanksgiving Reflection

by Rev. Franz Rigert

One of my fondest Thanksgiving memories takes me back to my childhood days growing up in a parsonage. I was just learning to read – back then a tedious chore for me more than an enjoyable pastime. But on this Thanksgiving morning I sat mesmerized on the couch, snuggled up in a blanket, smelling the turkey roasting and imagining the life of those early pioneers who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620. Unbeknownst to me, this children’s story about Pilgrims and Natives was told through the lens of 17th century colonialism. I read about turkeys and deer, corn and cabbage, and about the earliest harvest festivals shared with the Wampanoag Native Americans. The relationship between the Mayflower people and the Original people of this land was characterized largely as mutually supportive, though the story did lift up vivid depictions of battles with jabbing spears and flying arrows.



Our history lessons characterized the concept of the Doctrine of Discovery as adventurous explorations of a wild, vast westward frontier. I never thought of it as a taking of land and a conquering of people. When history books told the early war stories, so often they painted pictures of savage natives attacking pioneer villages rather than the other way around. They failed altogether to teach us about the often brutal subjugation and displacement of Native Americans and about the subsequent relegation of First Nation people to less desirable reservation lands.

Next year marks the 400 anniversary of those Separatists (soon to be Congregationalists) who came from Plymouth, England, on the Mayflower. As part of our spiritual heritage, the United Church of Christ has an opportunity and a responsibility to help reframe the understanding of our history. It feels especially right to approach Thanksgiving with a spirit of gratitude AND a spirit of confession. You may know that the oldest English language publishing company in North America is The Pilgrim Press! In recent years the national setting of the UCC has rebranded this publishing enterprise with a logo containing a small “p” to shift the understanding from the “Pilgrims” of our nation’s history to “pilgrims” on a journey – implying that all of us are on a quest for truth and spiritual insight. They have also repurposed the pilgrim press as a publishing platform particularly for diverse cultural voices and emerging progressive theological thought.

Perhaps you have heard there is another 400 year commemoration occurring this year, marking the first enslavement of Africans in North America in 1619. The New York Times Magazine is “marking this 400th anniversary with essays, images, stories and poems that challenge readers to reframe their understanding of U.S. history by considering 1619 as the start of this nation’s story” (quote from The

1619 Project website). For nearly 250 years slavery allowed pioneers to reap the benefits of land expansion, crop development and plantation wealth.

In the same way many of us are rediscovering the story of our land's Original People, we are learning anew about the effects of slavery on an entire people. While we studied slavery in grade school, it wasn't until I watched the original "Roots" miniseries as an 11 year old in 1977 that I was shaken to an awareness of the atrocities rooted in bigotry and discrimination. I learned of beatings and lynching, and eventually a civil war. My parents then told me stories of the era of Jim Crow Laws and a civil rights movement led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. aimed at ending inequality and segregation.

Much is written, these days, about the systemic effects of racism on every African American generation. Vast economic and social inequities remain evident in every major aspect of life – education, employment, health care, housing, criminal justice. I never knew much about racial profiling until I witnessed it firsthand and began to ask myself why so many African Americans were pulled over by the police in this little town where they represented just a fraction of the population. Today we are in the midst of a movement toward honest reflection and confessional expression, particularly around these two historical atrocities. Many of us are acknowledging the ways white privilege has harmed people of color. Some are surfacing ideas about reparations. Others will have symbols of Native American and African American culture at our tables this Thanksgiving as a reminder of our desire to be both truth tellers and grateful Americans.

In many ways Colonialism and Christianity were inextricably bound. Together they perpetuated systems of power and oppression. Many of us have also had to relearn the bible in an attempt to recover from childhood notions of a God of vengeance who scared us into obedience by threatening damnation. Over time we discovered a God of infinite grace and unending compassion, and one particularly emphatic commandment – Love All People. We know what God expects of us, but it is hard because it demands some things from us.

Gloria Steinem once observed, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free' (John 8:32), but not before it makes you good and angry." (edited slightly)

So this Thanksgiving I invite you to ponder the notions of privilege and power in light of the truths we know in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I urge you to reflect on this season of gratitude for the land and nation we love, remembering in particular those who endured long suffering.

With blessings abundant,

Franz