

The Modern Pioneer¹

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Pittsfield, MA

November 20, 1904

Text: John 6:38, "For I came down from Heaven not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me."

Scripture: Lev. 23:34-36, 39-41; Deut. 16:13-15; Gov. Proclamation; Rev. 21:1-7.

We are looking forward this morning to one of the great festive days of the year. Happy was the thought which inspired Gov. Bradford² to establish a harvest festival day of thanksgiving and joy. So it happens that year after year we make most elaborate and extensive plans to make this day a day of great joy and pleasure. By the very exuberance of our delight, we try to show our thankfulness, and our good feelings towards each other and the world. If we are people of deep feeling and devotion we try to acknowledge our dependence upon God and offer our prayer of thanks and praise unto him for whatever has befallen us during the year. With this whole-hearted joy and gladness and reverence we join in making this day, a day of great meaning to all.

But why is it that we can thus feel as we do? Those whose life for the past year has been filled to overflowing by every desire and about every wish being satisfied, such, I say, may well join the joys of such a day. But some of them do not. Others, whose life has been one continual period of hardship disappointment, suffering, and sorrow, such people seem to look forward to a day like this with a far greater sense of appreciation and expectancy than those who have been most favored. Even those who hardly know what a luxury is, plan and save so that on this one day of the year, they may shut out the poverty and want of daily life and give themselves over to one day of comparative luxury and comfort.

¹ Note written before the text: "Written to give courage and independence and faith to people just recovering from a period of discouragement."

² Governor William Bradford (1590-1657), Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1621-1633.

No, it cannot be that the real significance of Thanksgiving Day rests in our feeling of thanksgiving for the abundance of good things that have come to us during the year, for it seems that those who have had the most, care the least, and those who have had the least care the most. Then too I wonder if we of today celebrate as sincere a festival of Thanksgiving as did those early Pilgrims. It seems that out of the very needs of their life, rather than out of its abundance came this day of thanksgiving. No! It is not so much out of the past with its accomplishments, as out of the future with its hopes comes this feeling which prompts us to a period of Thanksgiving. At a time such as this, your feelings are feelings of hope, rather than exaltation, of forward looking rather than backward looking. Not what has been done through us and for us in the past so much as what we hope to have done through us and for us in the future. Not what we love, or what we have done, or what we are is the basis of our thanksgiving, but what through God's grace and our own effort we hope to have, and hope to do, and hope to become in the magic ever alluring, but unknown future which stretches out before us. It is a consecration to the things undone rather than an exaltation over the things done. Today we face, not the past but the future.

In solving the problems of the future, we often avoid many foolish mistakes and embarrassing blunders by going back to the past for help and wisdom. I often try to picture to myself the kind of men they were, those pioneers who first settled in this country, and held their thanksgiving festivals on the shores of an unknown continent thanking God for the things that had been vouchsafed to them and consecrating themselves to the unsolved problems of a new world with all its hardship. I try to get some conception of the mental and moral equivalent of those men who in the middle of the 18th century picked their way through the Hoosac mountains³ leaving behind the comforts of the settlements near the coast, and resolutely faced the vast unknown and unexplored. They began that great movement westward which in a century's time had crossed the continent and made the settlements of those far away western cities on the Pacific coast. From our ease and safety and quiet we can look back to those days of hardship and danger, and read the stories of their adventures, and try to glean from them something of the spirit, something of the character which led them through days of discouragement and darkness, to days of victory and rejoicing.

³ The Hoosac mountains form the western edge of the northwest Berkshire plateau of western Massachusetts.

We can read there the elements of character which were common to them all, and which sustained them in all their adventurous pioneer work. We can look at the lives of men who have been the pioneers in political, moral, and social advances. There we read the same story and understand that the same type of man is pioneer in one case as in the other. It is all very pointedly brought out in this bit from Pittsfield history, the more important because it speaks of the usual rather than the unusual.

By the summer of 1752," so the story tells us, "which is usually accounted the birth-year of Pittsfield, some of the settlers had log cabins ready to receive their families. And first came Solomon Deming, from Wethersfield with his wife Sarah behind him on the pillion. She was a maiden of seventeen when Solomon first essayed to provide them a dwelling place in the wilderness of the Green Mountains. Now a brave young good wife of twenty-six, she entered Poontoosuck, the first white woman who ever called it home.⁴

These were the kind of people who were pioneers in all the new world movements. Such as they held their festivals of thanksgiving and praised God for what had been accomplished towards the realization of their hopes and consecrated themselves to work of the future in what they hoped to have, and do and become. The great advance in civilization which distinguishes the country today from the country of two hundred years ago and more represents the half-defined, hazy dreams that flitted across the vision of their dream life, and filled their hearts with joy and praise as they offered their prayer of thanksgiving.

It was no ordinary courage that led those men and women across the unknown ocean into an unknown land, and there to establish a new home, a new government, a new society. It was rather the courage of a few who were willing to follow the unusual course and commit themselves to all the dangers and uncertainties of an untrammelled land. As soon as the practical safety of those shore towns had become assured, men of the same courageous nature began to turn their faces to the west. Leaving behind them the safety and security of the well-settled towns. They resolutely faced the uncertainties, the dangers, which the unexplored country had in store for them. The advancing wave of

⁴ Davis is taking this material from J. E. A. Smith, 1869, *The History of Pittsfield (Berkshire County) Massachusetts, From the Year 1734 to the year 1800*. Compiled and written, under the general direction of a committee, Boston: Lee and Shepard.

civilization rolled across the country carrying on its crest the bravest and most courageous of our race. They were men of courage, those pioneers of an early day.

But it requires something more than courage to take such a step. Many a man of courage never goes outside of the ordinary, simply because he acts according to the dictates of other people. For a man to free himself from tradition, to break with the habits and customs of the people among whom he lives, to resolve to do a thing in the doing of which he must act alone, such conduct requires courage, but it also requires independence. No weakling who follows along in the wake of the majority, and quietly assents to the will of everyone around him can ever claim that independence which the world is calling for. What would have become of the germs of liberal religion in New England had Channing and Theodore Parker⁵ lacked that independence of spirit which thrust them into the vanguard of the advance in religious thought of that day. How could the slave problem have been handled had not a few men had the independent spirit sufficient to take the initiative and raise the issue. These early pioneers who bravely took the advance step enduring the hardship that others might enjoy the comfort, they were men of independence, not that independence born of conceit and arrogance, but that independence born of a sublime conception of duty and obedience to God's will.

But beneath courage and independence there is the still more profound characteristic, which is the basis upon which all else rests, that is faith. It is not without reason that so much emphasis has always been put upon faith. Faith in the integrity of life, in the triumph of goodness, in the validity of God's truth. It is this that is at the bottom of every movement and act of life. We can follow our facts just as far as they lead, we can follow exact knowledge so far as exact knowledge is obtainable, but beyond that we must commit ourselves to faith, and act in accordance with what we believe to be true. It was a deep unquestioning faith, faith in the integrity of nature's laws, faith in the mind of man, and in the wisdom of God that supported the pioneers as they crossed the ocean to this new world and took up their slow but steady march across the mountains and prairies to the Pacific coast. Such I saw were the

⁵ Davis refers to William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) early 19th century founding Unitarian minister, and Theodore Parker (1810-1860) influential progressive Unitarian minister, powerful advocate of abolitionism.

characteristics of those early pioneers, the men and women who laid the foundations of our American life.

But we turn from the past to the present and future, and what is our outlook? It is true that nearly all the lands of the world have been explored. It is true that our country is quite thoroughly settled. It is true that the dangers and heroisms of early days no longer offer themselves as fields for our courage, independence and faith. But those are but the beginnings of civilizations. No man can face the duties of life today, as a worker, as a citizen, as a man, who does not feel that he is challenged to take the place of a pioneer in solving the problems offered by conditions which are as great a menace to us as ever the lurking savage war to our white ancestors. I am fully aware of the tremendous gains that have been made. I know that there is no warrant for a cup of despair, and I am certain that this world as it is this minute is a very genial comfortable sort of a place in which to live. But just because so much has been done and because there are things now which everyone can see need to be done, just because of this, I say, everyone who lives at all seriously must feel the challenge to his own personal effort and consecration. The very limitations of our physical safety call for almost infinite labor to destroy the inroads of crime, carelessness and disease upon the safety of life. In political life, from one end of this country to the other, in towns, state or city, men of honor and public spirit are calling almost in vain for helpers in their effort to remove the political interests of the country from the meshes of corruption. That call is to every man that can cast a vote. No less urgent and pressing is the call which is coming to us every day from the warfare between labor and capital. The great pity of it all is that no one who is in the battle can seem to get above the plain of dollars and cents. Only now and then does there appear a person who sees that it is not a question of wages, or the number of hours of labor that is at the bottom of all the trouble, but it is the moral principle of the recognition of personality.

Closely connected with this labor problem is the problem of the idle classes. The vagrants, the criminals, the defectives, the idle rich, we cannot afford to support such a mass of useless material and it is our problem to turn them to some advantage to the progress of the world.

There are problems of a moral nature that are very pressing. It is useless to repent the evils that demand the efforts of

every earnest man and woman in relieving the strain and removing the temptations to sin, which are so apparent in daily life.

Over and above all else, does not the conditions of things in the religious affairs of this country demand most pressing service. Not alone the people, but the ministry as well, have feared to face the problems of religion which the conditions of the new world have put upon them. The result is that the church, the ministry, the people, and the cause of religion itself have suffered, and at this moment demand courage, independence and faith as no other problem in modern life demands them.

Is all the work done? Can we sit back and fold our hands glorying in the deeds of a former generation, and offering our prayer of thanksgiving for the things which through God's grace have been accomplished and made possible our ease?

God forbid! If ever there was a time when pioneers were needed, that time is now. In whatever direction one may turn there is the demand for a pioneer with courage, independence and faith enough to launch out into the unknown, and undiscovered, leaving behind the traditions and accumulations of custom which have become too much of a hinderance to the normal growth of man. This is the call of this Thanksgiving festival. No so much the joy over what has been done, as the rejoicing hope over the distant realization of dreams as yet but half-outlived, a hope that fills our soul with joy and buoyancy. Out of our sorrow, out of our pleasure, out of our failure, out of our success, we all join in this hope of the harvest season, the hope of things to have and things to do, and souls to be in the realization of the future towards which we look with courage and faith. The satisfaction with which one reaps the harvest is not in the harvest itself but in the value of the harvest for the coming year, and the hope in the fertile seeds which give promise of still greater harvests. As the day comes and goes let our hearts be filled with thanksgiving for the fine thoughts, the noble ideals, the Divine aspirations which lead us into the future consecrated to the realization of God's Kingdom.

There, too, we cannot control entirely the working of things which bring about our own harvest, whatever it may be that we plant. So, if it happens that our crops are a failure, we shall come to another harvest with sad and heavy hearts. But we can control the high thoughts, the noble ideals of service, the right-minded hopes of days to come. And no disasters however cruel can take from us our hopes of days to come. For our own comfort then, let us fill our minds with noble hopes as we pass

this festival day, and let our thanksgiving be a Thanksgiving of consecration to the pioneer service in God's Kingdom. "For I came down from Heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me."⁶

⁶ John 6:38.