

The Puritan Spirit in the Life of Today
Union Thanksgiving Service
Preached at the South Congregational Church
Earl C. Davis
Pittsfield, MA
November 26, 1908¹

Text: Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Never before in my life has the sense of the glory and the sanctity of human life and its wonderful possibilities been more forcibly and irresistibly born home to my consciousness than in these balmy autumnal days just now giving way to the restful sleep of winter's purity. Life has abounded in that deeper feeling that speaks only the language of the understanding heart. I have seen and felt the beauty of these lines:

A haze on the far horizon,
The infinite tender sky,
The ripe rich tint of the cornfields,
And the wild geese sailing high,--
And all over upland and lowland
The charm of the golden rod,--
Some of us call it Autumn,
And other call it God.²

In the midst of it all I have seemed to catch a glimpse of the inner purpose and the deeper spirit of those sturdy Pilgrims and Puritans who have made this rugged New England a land of sacred association, and hallowed by those events of deeper import for the human race that have taken place on this soil. In their

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908. A handwritten note on the side of the manuscript says, "Published." I have not found any evidence of the publication of this sermon.

² William Herbert Carruth (1859-1924). A stanza from his poem, "Each in His Own Tongue," in Francis Fisher Browne, ed., *Golden Poems By British and American Authors*, Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1906, p. 499.

memory and to their honor this day of thanksgiving to the Overshadowing Spirit is set apart. I love, honor, and cherish the memory of the Puritan. I am proud that the blood of the Puritan runs in my veins. My whole being becomes alive with a new power, when I get a glimpse of that noble Puritan Spirit. Because I know that it has a profound message for us now, I have taken form my subject, "The Puritan Spirit in the Life of Today." Because I believe that the Puritan Spirit was also the spirit of early Christianity, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Carpenter Prophet of Nazareth, I go back to the words of his teaching for a clear-cut statement of what I wish to say, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." That is the Spirit of Christ, and that is the Spirit of the Puritan, and, insofar as I am able to understand that Spirit, so grand and noble in its vision, what I shall say this morning is based upon it.

I know that we are inclined to speak lightly of the Puritan. Sometimes we go so far as to speak of him and his laws and the austerity of his life with contempt. We judge him by the clothing of form and dogma which he happened to wear, and overlook the noble manhood of his bearing, and fail to grasp the sturdiness of his character, the virility of his mind, and the grandeur of his moral purpose. But such a judgement is not a judgement upon the Puritan, but a judgement upon us. It is an exposure, not of our greatness and our breadth of mind, but of our ignorance and narrowness. Too often we think of the Puritan as a narrow bigoted religious fanatic, bound hard and fast by Ironclad laws, living a rigid cold unhuman life, interested only in the world to come, in the Bible, and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.³

Let me suggest something of the Puritan Spirit.

Beneath all other considerations, we must not forget that the Puritan had a great and dominating purpose in his life. Living at a time when the English national life was corrupt and foul beyond our imaginations, the Puritan was one who had a deep faith that human life is pregnant with greater possibilities than the lowlife of pleasure and immorality, such as he saw about him in the court of King James, and the wide circle of

³ John Foxe (1516-1587), *Actes and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church*, popularly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. Printed by John Day in 1563.

English national life which the court influenced. In the midst of the sickening follies of a profligate aristocracy, the government itself had become but a mechanism for promoting and supporting a gross licentiousness, and the burden rested heavy on the suffering people. The Puritan saw the vision of a life of righteousness and decency, in which men should be true, not to the lowest and most base, but to the highest and most divine in human life. Filled with the great dynamic of this moral purpose, the Puritan consecrated himself to the work of wresting the control of the destinies of the English national life from those who were perverting and prostituting the true functions of government. That man might have a chance to live decently and in honor, the Puritans of England, under the inspiration of Milton,⁴ and the leadership of Cromwell,⁵ strengthened by a deep faith in the obligations placed upon man by the living God, assailed the very strongholds of corruption, overthrew the dynasty of the Stuarts, shattered forever the fiction of the Divine right to rule, and purged the English government of its iniquity. That England might be a nation in which men should be men, and true nobility of manhood should triumph over a false nobility of form, the Puritan lived, thought, and gave his all. The Puritan was a man of purpose, and his purpose was to realize his ideal of the noble life.

We speak of the Puritan as the man with the Bible, and in so doing we try to leave the implication that he was a man of a very limited and meager range of knowledge, that he was narrow bigoted and dogmatic. We forget that for the Puritan, the Bible was a great storehouse of human history, of human achievement and moral purpose, made vital by the living personalities that stood out strong and clear in its pages, and breathing the spirit of man's eternal search for the truth and wisdom that makes men free, breathing the spirit of the living God. Only for a few years had this great storehouse of ancient history, of heroic achievement and noble idealism, been in the hands of the general readers. Between its pages, from the story of Moses freeing the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage down to the story of Jesus freeing the people of his generation from a deathly ecclesiasticism and proclaiming the coming of a world of

⁴ John Milton (1608-1674) English poet, author of *Paradise Lost*.

⁵ Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) English politician and soldier. From 1653-1658 he served as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland during the English Civil War.

righteousness, the Puritan found nourishment for his love of Freedom, and a confirmation of his mighty vision of a world of righteousness. It was the great storehouse of knowledge, and in that knowledge the Puritan saw, was to be found the weapon and the power through which he should fulfill his great work. In that wisdom, the gleaning of the ages, the Puritan saw the truth of the living God. In that book he saw the symbol of the power of knowledge in the life of humanity. He had a problem to face, and he faced it as the prophets of old had faced theirs. In his tasks, and in his life, he felt the presence of that same Living God that has been a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day all through history,⁶ leading men from freedom unto freedom into a life of righteousness and nobility. That was the spirit of the Puritan with his Bible, that spirit which searches after knowledge.

With the lives of the Martyrs we associate the Puritan in our vulgar speech. But do we ever stop to think that in the lives of the martyrs the Puritan found strength and confirmation in his consecration to truth? I honor him the more when I think of him, driven from his home and his fatherland, alone and in exile, finding companionship in the lives of those heroes to whose devotion to truth we owe our life of freedom and happiness. When we speak of the austerity of his life, let us not forget that it was such, not because he loved life the less, but because he loved truth and honor more.

I love that Puritan spirit, for its lofty moral purpose, for its keen insight into truth, and for its noble and unswerving devotion to that truth. Let us forget the forms and the dogmas, let us forget the clothing, of the Puritan and get down into the very depths of his soul, and see and feel the strength of the purpose of his life, the spirit of truth as it was in him. Those forms and dogmas will pass away, but so long as human life remains, it must respond with quickening breath, to the spirit of lofty purpose and noble heroism that characterized the life of the Puritan of England and New England.

So much for our Puritan spirit, and that Puritan Spirit rings true to the spirit of Jesus Christ and the early Christian Church. But what about our ideals and the spirit of our own times? Is it not true that we no longer respond to the deep

⁶ See Exodus 13:21.

spirit of the Puritan and the deeper spirit of Christ simply because our lives and our thoughts are no longer dominated by any great and ravishing idealism? More and more, we are told, from this nation, to whose early history the Puritan's spirit made such magnificent contributions, that spirit of lofty idealism, of heroic consecration, of noble and austere simplicity, is passing away. In its place, there is appearing the ideal of wealth, and consecration to money-making, and life devoted to pleasure-seeking and luxury. Is this true? And if it is true, are the churches of the poor and despised Carpenter of Nazareth being caught within the alluring folds of its outspreading mantle?

Is it true that our God is wealth? Within the past year or two, we have been made to see that those very industrial plants to which we were wont to point with pride, have so related themselves with our local and national governments, have so debased our courts in the interests of their rapacity and greed that we fear to think of the hidden corruption to which that which has been disclosed points. All this has been in the interests of making money. We know not only that facts have been demonstrated in particular cases, but that suspicion rests upon the whole thing, a stain placed there by the hand of the power of wealth.

But not only have we debased our institutions, but we have laid violent hands upon our people and our children, have menaced the integrity of the home that we might increase our capacity for making money. We, who have come here this morning to this house of worship, dedicated to the spirit and the teaching of Jesus Christ, are conscious of the fact that, try as hard as we will, we cannot rid ourselves of the echo of the cry of the hungry child; we cannot free ourselves from that haunting look of despair that flashes across the face of a man who sees for the first time that he is defeated in the struggle for existence, and goes down in the fight, to be trampled on by the onrushing crowd, mad in its passion for money. Howsoever tightly we may shut our doors and draw our shades, as we sit ourselves down to our tables bounteously laden with food and dainties, we cannot shut from our minds the cruel fact that thousands are going hungry. It may be their fault, but it is not for us to condemn. Our hands are not clean. However completely protected our families and children may be, however little they may lack in the way of comfort, of a pure home atmosphere, of a bright

and encouraging outlook for the future, we cannot always hide from them the fact [that] there are thousands of children today who have no comforts, no home, and no future but a future of want, degradation and shame. Perhaps someday our children, if we teach them to be pious snobs, will someday look upon their unfortunate contemporaries as we do now and say that their condition is due to lack of thrift and industry.

Why cannot we shut these facts from our minds? Because they exist, and we instinctively see and realize the injustice and the inhumanity of it. You know that a million and a half of children, who should be at school and getting a child's share of childhood pleasure and life, are working in our mines, mills, and factories, so that you and I may have cheap goods and natty, while the owner and the employer reap large profits. Not far from 5,000,000 women are working under the same conditions. We know that most of them should either be at home ministering to its needs, or preparing themselves for the future homelife in some other atmosphere and conditions than a stuffy factory. There are thousands upon thousands of men who are working for wages that are not sufficient to provide a decent living and a respectable home for a family. All this, and more too, is the price that we are paying, and the suffering that they undergo, because we think that it is more important to produce cheap goods than rugged men; because we think that it is more important to pay large dividends upon invested capital and accumulate large fortunes, than it is to care for children, and lay up a wealth of strong men and women.

But you say that this does not concern us here in this city. It is just the same here as it is everywhere else. We pay just what is absolutely necessary in order to get our work done for us and on. Nor do we stop to ask [of] the effect of the low wage upon the family. Do you not know that there are plants in this city that are employing women and young people for the simple reason that they can get the work done the more cheaply in that way? Do you not realize that when we do that we are taking from the man the opportunity of earning a decent living for his family? Do you not see that we are knocking down the man who is trying to provide a home and a living for a family of children? Do you not see that we are compelling him to lower his standard of living, and are paving the way for all kinds of immorality to come in and destroy the integrity of the home? Do you not see that for the sake [of] food, raiment, comfort and luxury for

ourselves, we are taking advantage of a man's weakness and desperation of his circumstances, and grabbing from him, in a defenseless condition, all that our strength can get? Do you not see that we are striking a man when he is down, and sucking from his almost lifeless body the last drop of human blood, before we cast him upon the ash heap of social rubbish? So long as we remain indifferent to this situation, so long as we accept these facts and conditions in silence, so long as we are reluctant to take trowel in hand and help to rebuild the walls of our city of honor, and integrity, just so long are we crying, "Lord, Lord," and do not the will of the Father who is in heaven.⁷

We know that these conditions exist. But the conditions themselves are not so bad as the one fact that we seek to justify them on the grounds of human necessity. If we have come to a point where it is necessary to declare that these conditions must exist in order that our industries may prosper, and that we have ample incomes, and pay liberal dividends, let us be frank and honest, let us at least seem to be what we really are. If we are to be pirates, let us at least fly the black flag from our masthead, and take down the pure white flag of Christian purpose and, with tears of reluctance, fold it and put it away in that golden casket where we have laid so many treasures of the soul in order that we might worship our God of material prosperity.

Again, let us not deceive ourselves that we are doing the will of the Father, or that we are following in the footsteps of Christ, when we lend aid in gifts of charity and benevolence to the most pitiable of the objects whom our avarice creates. It is not human, it is not Christian, to think that in our worship of Greed we may take from our fellow men the last hope of his honest self-support, and at the next moment in our attempt to worship God, and to relieve our feelings of pity, we hand back to him the pittance of charity. I say this deliberately, and with a full appreciation of its significance. The conditions which I have described, made the more reprehensible by our attempted charity, do not square with the teachings of Jesus Christ, the heart and soul of whose teachings and whose spirit is expressed in the words that I have taken for a text, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

⁷ See Matthew 7:21.

But I cannot believe, and will not believe, that we are to be caught within the folds of this alluring covering of luxury and love of things. I am sure that the noble spirit that characterized the Puritan is awakening in our souls. I am sure that we too are beginning to see the vision of a world of righteousness, in which men shall be men, and the value of the human soul shall rise supreme above all other considerations, in which we shall put a premium on nobility of manhood and womanhood and shall in truth seek first of all the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and let these other things, take their proper place in the economy of life, and minister unto the moral and the spiritual upbuilding of the human personality, in this life so rich and pregnant in the possibilities of the divine. I cannot think or believe that our apparent indifference to these conditions is anything else than evidence that we are taking time, as did the Puritan of old, to arm ourselves with the great weapons of wisdom and truth, that we may the more effectively wage the war against selfishness, and greed, and bring in the kingdom of God and his righteousness. I believe that in these days we are going up to the mountaintop, on to Gethsemane, and there in the presence of the Infinite we shall see the full range of the truth of the Living God, and become armed with the strength of his power and wisdom.

I cannot believe but that we shall heed the call of the Infinite to the men and women of our time, and shall come forth, consecrated to the task to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and ready to cast behind us all conformity, and put out into the great ocean of the future, in our ships of truth, with their sails of purpose, guided by the unerring compass of the Spirit of God in the soul of men.

I cannot believe but that we shall yet become a nation with a lofty idealism, armed with truth and wisdom, and strengthened by a noble consecration, as were the Puritans of old, and those noble men who were first called "Christians" at Antioch.⁸

I believe and I know that we shall face the problems of our time, and respond to the call of the Infinite today. Let me quote from the poetic appeal of the young graduate from college to the men of his class at Harvard:

⁸ See Acts 11:26.

Old Gods have fallen and the new must rise!
Out of the dust of doubt and broken creeds,
The sons of those who cast men's idols low
Must build up for a hungry people's needs
New Gods, new hopes, new strength to toil and grow;
Knowing that naught that every lived can die,—
No act, no dream but spreads its sails, sublime
Sweeping across the visible seas of time
Into the treasure-haven of eternity.

The portals are open, the white road leads
Through thicket and garden o'er stone and sod.
On, up! Boot and saddle! Give spurs to your steeds!
There's a city beleaguered that cries for men's deeds,
For the faith that is strength and the love that is
God!
On, through the dawning! Humanity calls!
Life's not a dream in the clover!
On to the walls, on to the walls,
On to the walls, and over!⁹

That is the call to the men and women, that is the call to the churches of our time. This day is set aside that we may, by symbol and thought, go back to heroism and nobility of those early settlers, who laid the foundations of our national life. In the midst of their hardships and their sacrifices, they took time to give thanks and to renew their consecration to the great task. Let us, today, make this day potent in arousing in our lives that spirit that was in the Puritan, and let our family festivities be a meal of consecration to the best and noblest that is in this precious human life, the gift of the infinite and ever-loving God. Let us go back still further. In most of our churches we have a service which had its origin in the life of Jesus and his disciples. Tired and worn by the work of the day, spurned by the Pharisee, ridiculed by the mob, loved by the few, when it came night Jesus and his disciples were wont to go apart to some room together that they might refresh themselves in body and in soul. On that last night when his people were enjoying their great feast of the Passover, he and his

⁹ Hermann Hagedorn, Jr. (1882-1964), "Class Poem of 1907," *The Harvard Graduates Magazine*, Volume XVI, 1907-1908, Boston: The Harvard Graduates Association, p. 216.

disciples, the unwelcome, went apart for the last time to be together in the unbroken ranks of their fellowship. In that sacred hour they tasted the depths of human feeling, and saw the deep meaning of the responsibility of human life. Let us today carry something of that spirit into the deeper significance of this day of Thanksgiving, that we may see the more clearly the full meaning of those noble words, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;" that we may in the spirit of the Puritan, and in the spirit of the early Christian, realize that to this end have we been born and to this end have we come into the world that we should bear witness to the truth.