

Lecture #1

A PILGRIM FAITH FOR TODAY

Thank you for the privilege of this place. You have loved the Congregational Way of Church life a long time. We know that about you across the country, and honor you, and thank you for your caring about how the church lives and serves, and demonstrating it.

Your young people have come out from here and spent time in many of our churches. Some of your parishioners have become ours, and been loved in places far from here.

Always distinctive about any church, and perhaps especially Congregational churches, is its minister, its pastor – preacher-leaders. The names of Neil Swanson, Norman Ream and Philip Muth are important among us.

Intriguing, and a sign of hope for all our churches, is that Steven Peay is your minister today. Dr. Steven Peay. Dean of a Seminary. Celibate monk. Teacher. Student. Fearless explorer. Daring Pilgrim: until he is husband, father, pastor, and passionate promoter of a way of church life God gave him, bringing him to you.

Which means that in God's intention, you as a people are meant to be affected, to be challenged, and shaped, and molded by Steven's journey. God has chosen this peculiar and passionate mix of man to be used to affect you – to lead you to become something for the church and the World of today that God already believes you can be.

I want to encourage you on your journey. I want to bless you and call you to be a beacon and a lighthouse to us all; not out of what you have been, but out of what is possible, and what you are becoming, because of the good foundations of what you have been.

I never was a monk, or a seminary dean, or a widely read scholar. I am rather a dreamer, a seer of visions, a lover of history, a lover of the church, a climber of mountains, a paddler of rivers, a rower of lakes, a pilgrim who since youth has love the open road, who loves far places - - and their people, who sees their life and my own, as a journey; a journey of the heart, and who, through a certain loneliness, --always longs for home.

The highest honor for me was, always to be a preacher, the bearer of the message, the one who was a watchman called to see signals in the heavens, and call out news to the people beloved of God who are His own, His gathered congregation. But I am not pastor or preacher anymore. For I was taken from the company I loved, and flung out across the world to a place of some of the world's deepest hurt and most horrendous grief to find a way to make peace, to reach the broken heart and mend it by the power of the one gift God wants us all to have: His love.

It is a whole new adventure – shared with my wife – and probably the most important work I have ever done.

In the years beyond the parish, I have seen the Church across the world, and across America: and I feel great pain about it, and great hope for it, and a growing sense that this is a critical time, a dangerous and even dark time for the Church (despite so many successes in America). But a tune in which those churches – who call themselves “Pilgrim,” who dare confess their heritage as Puritans, who live a life honoring especially the Congregation and the work of the Spirit among “the two or three gathered together” are called by God to offer, out of that unique way of doing church, something new and redemptive in the whole church's life in our time.

It is this I want to bring to you this weekend, as your friend and Christian brother and comrade.

I

I want to say a little about the American setting for Congregationalists today.

I am proud to be a Pilgrim. I believe it is the way of the open heart. Of wide arms. Of a journey taken with Jesus leading His own, as He promised to do – saying “Be not afraid. Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

The Pilgrim Way of church life takes seeking people where they are, invites them into a fellowship, a company of believers who have agreed by covenant, to walk together on a journey with Jesus, trusting Him to take their hand, and lead them on, and show them the way.

Because it is a journey with Jesus, those who come do not need to know the destination, or the outcome. The critical thing is to know who is with you and to trust Him utterly. It is as Burl Ives used to sing.

“I know where I’m going and I know who’s going with me.”

Americans are writing and reading about John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, and the “rise to revolution” of those Colonies who saw injustice and believed God gave rights to Kings to rule in a certain way, but gave rights to subjects to rebel when those ways were violated.

They looked back to their Pilgrim forebears and read their Mayflower Compact that had founded a life together on faith in God and His leadership. And on the basis of that, they dared rise up to create a country based entirely on the leading of the God Who gives His children life together.

I BELIEVE WE ARE KEEPERS OF THAT WAY. It is we who have cherished and preserved it, and have it to offer this land we love, today. And we have a place – a peculiar and important place in the sorting out, and refashioning that will be going on in this century.

I believe there is a kind of new Puritan Theology that is meant for today, to show something to a country and church hedged around with seductive temptations in theology and morality, in ethics and life.

We have to offer –

The setting of faith as a journey.

- The idea of the covenant – this agreement of people to walk together in love, following the Spirit.
- The lifting up of “rightrelationship” instead of simply “right religion,” honoring the promise of Jesus that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18: 19-20)

It is the great religion of community – of unity of life together.

And – its idea of independence is based on a deep belief, a high doctrine, of the reality and power and wonder of the Holy Spirit – Third person of the Trinity.

II

Having said that, I would like to offer some counsel from an old Pilgrim. I would like to just offer a few things I’ve observed, some things I’ve come to deeply feel, in the course of a long journey in the church, in the ministry, in America, and across the world.

I would say: DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE JOURNEY. Many Christians are afraid to change. Many church leaders are afraid to change. And often, they convey their fear to their ministers, so the ministers too become afraid of following Jesus into some of those difficult places where He wants them to go, wants whole Christian congregations to go. Indeed where they must go if they are to be faithful to the plan God is trying to put in place in every one of those neighborhoods and towns where He has gathered His people.

Every pastor needs to have a few people who are not only praying for him or her, but are quietly encouraging and saying "Go for it. We are with you. We believe in you. We will be there, at your side."

Then, I would say DON'T FEAR THE SPIRIT. Remember how Jesus chided the church leader Nicodemus who came to Him under cover of darkness, to talk theology? Jesus essentially said "Nicodemus, it's not about theology and the fine points of doctrine. It's about the Spirit. It's about something happening to your heart. It's about something being born anew, in you – something you can't control. The Spirit comes on His own schedule. You have to be ready."

Even great Biblical traditions in the church sometimes are afraid of the Spirit because He's not neatly defined and controllable. They are nervous about Pentecost, and invent doctrines to try to get around it.

The Spirit is the way Jesus promised to come to us as Comforter, as Power for the "doing" of ministry – All the work of ministry. And, for us Congregationalists, the living, doing, acting Holy Spirit – present when two or three are gathered together in His Name – is the whole theological and spiritual foundation of our highly touted claim of the right to be free, and independent, and autonomous churches. Because the Spirit is in our midst, personally present. That's why we don't need Bishops, and popes, or even priests!

I would also say: The church – and its ministry – is for risks. No minister is really able to lead a church in the way God wants it to go, unless he or she is prepared to risk – life. And job. Everything. Jesus said so. "He who is not willing to give up all for me and for the gospel – yea, even his own life is not worthy of me."

There's no safe way. Ministry – great ministry (for pastors and for lay people) – is only done by risking everything! Which means, and I add this: THAT THIS IS AN IMPOSSIBLE LIFE! The reality of church is that it is full of sin and sinners. And, it is at the same time the Bride of Christ. I heard the head of a great seminary say not long ago the "The local church is essential for the saving of the world!" This strange body of believing people, this mixed up crowd of so-human folks is the essential instrument God is using to support, and send, and pray for, and expedite His whole mission in the world.

My dear friend in the ministry, Roger Anderson, who led his Presbyterian church across town for 32 years, used to call me up every once in a while and say "Arthur, this Senior Ministry business is impossible!" And of course, he was right. But that didn't mean either one of us – for a minute – was to stop doing it!"

Then this last bit of counsel for now: DON'T MISTAKE POLITICAL OR ECONOMIC THEORY FOR FAITH OR THEOLOGY. I've had many a business guy whose real faith was the free enterprise system of economics. That's what he really believed in. That's what was really sacred to him: Much more than Jesus, Son of God and Son of man, dying of the cross for the saving of the world.

Christianity is not simply about personal freedom, and individual opportunity. Indeed, for Congregationalists, it's about the congregation. It's about people being together.

There are jokes about certain church traditions being "The Republican Party at Prayer." Listen, Jesus is far more radical, far more demanding, far more exciting than any political party or political candidate has ever been, or will ever be! We need to be clear about that.

Jesus, and our love for Him, and commitment to Him, and life in Him, is far and away more critical, more crucial than any political or economic factor in human life.

Even in the day when we are suddenly so bent out of shape and fearful and concerned about the Muslim tradition and so-called “Muslim Fundamentalist.” Please read the October issue of the Atlantic Monthly. Its cover story on the The Next Christianity should encourage you, hearten you, and show you that it is Christianity – basic, conservative, “primitive,” first century radical Christianity – that is already sweeping the world and is going to be the central factor in world affairs throughout this amazing 21st century before us!

III

Out of the experience God has given Molly and me in our reconciliation work in Africa, and now in America, I am convinced that the church of Christ – especially in America, must be about the recovering of a biblical and humane theology.

Forget “Liberal,” and “fundamental,” and “Evangelical.” What we need is to take the Bible seriously. This is The Book God has given us, through the Patriarchs and Prophets, the Apostles and saints, to tell us God’s heart of love about life, and how the children of the world whom He loves so much should live it! We won’t do everything the Bible says. But we should read everything it says, and struggle with why it’s there, and what is God saying to us through these people He’s chosen as His messengers and mouth pieces.

And, if we follow the Lord of love, who died for love’s sake, then our theology, our gospel, will be a humane gospel. We need to care about all people. All people have a right to live, a right to live in America, a right to be our neighbors. Our job is to love them as people. Not to be always dividing them as right or wrong, but being ourselves the people of love – which will in itself, be compelling. We don’t have to accept or say their ideas, or politics, or religion, or sexuality are right. We just have to try to love them and be Jesus’ people among them.

Jesus’ last great prayer on earth was for unity – for people to be one in heart. We need to be together. We need to accept each other. Rwanda and Burundi – the land of the genocide, where we work – and are going next Friday – are places of hatred. Hatred between tribes. Hatred between Christians. Jesus was the Prince of Peace. He came to bring us together – by bringing us all home to God.

All over the world, people are longing to see signs that there is a real God alive and at work in the world. A God who does heal, who does help, who does give hope. They look for “Miracles, signs, and wonders!” And why should they not see them in the life of our Pilgrim Churches?

We can preserve principles. But we can also offer an open heart. My father, a Congregational minister of another generation, lived by a high, if not sometimes rigid, ethic and morality. But as I looked at his life after he died, I realized that, in all his relationships with us four children, with our mother, with his congregations, and all people, he never let principle stand in the way of love.

Our great call as Christians, as genuine Pilgrim people, is to be promoters and purveyors of the way of love.

(Dated 11/1-3/2002)