

TOGETHER WE CAN

They thought they were going to Virginia. But that's not how it turned out for our spiritual forebears. Instead they ended up on the wintry shores of what in time would be called Massachusetts. Still, they were together, ready to make a new start, and that's what mattered.

It's hard to pinpoint when their journey began. Not the departure of their ship from England, but rather their journey as a congregation. One could say it began with those first followers of Jesus in an upper room on Pentecost. Or with the formation of the Catholic Church in the first centuries of Christianity. One could trace their journey back to Henry VIII and his move to break away from Rome to create a specifically English church. Or one could date their beginnings from the flight of eight hundred dissenters, Protestants, who fled persecution under Queen Mary and discovered the teachings of John Calvin while on the continent. They would become known as Puritans upon their return to England because of their desire to purify the church. But perhaps their real beginning as a separate congregation came about in 1606 when under the leadership of Elder William Brewster, and Pastor John Robinson, they began secretly meeting at the Manor House in the village of Scrooby.

They met in secret because what they were doing, worshipping outside the authority and influence of the Church of England, was illegal. Their secret didn't hold, however, and they were discovered by the authorities in 1607. Many of them were arrested and imprisoned. Some were beaten. But still they held together. And that was always the key to their existence. They were together.

In 1608 their Pastor, John Robinson, went to Amsterdam, to try and find them a new home in the Netherlands, a country known for religious liberty in a day marked by religious intolerance in most places. And find it he did, in Leyden. And so, the next year, the members of the congregation followed to settle there for a time. They were far from home. They were surrounded by a different culture and a new language. And for a while it worked. But they also were surrounded by a different set of moral attitudes and, as William Bradford would later write, "manifold temptations." So, they began to make plans to move together across the wide sea, to the New World.

Not all of them could make the journey, but most did. They first traveled to England, and there arranged for passage to Virginia on the Speedwell. But it proved a leaky vessel, unable to make a Transatlantic crossing. So further arrangements were made to secure the Mayflower. There were over one hundred of them. Not all part of the congregation. Some who came along simply wanted to try their hands at life in the New World. And believing

Jesus' words that "whatever you do for the least of these my brothers and sisters," they also welcomed aboard street urchins, orphans, who needed adults to care for them feed, them, house them, love them. In fact, of the thirty-five children on board, some eighteen of them were orphans taken under the wings of the congregation's members.

Together they set out for the New World in September of 1620, at the height of storm season. Indeed, as they sought to make a safe crossing, the waves were so large they swept one man overboard. He drowned. But the other men, women and children, one-hundred-two in all, survived the crossing. Though it was a time marked by seasickness for many, together they managed to reach not Virginia, but nonetheless, the New World.

They first landed on the outer tip of Cape Cod. There, while anchored off what in time would be known as Provincetown, they drew up the Mayflower Compact. A document that would cement their relationship not just as a congregation, but also as a community. "We whose names are underwritten," it read, "do . . . solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and bind ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation"

And so, newly bound together as a civil body politic, as a village, as a town, they made their way to a safer harbor where the blustering winds and ice and snow might not be so harsh. On December 21, they landed at what they would call New Plimouth, and after disembarking quickly set to creating crude shelters for the harsh months ahead. And harsh they were indeed. As the new year began in January, the weaker ones among them began to fall sick to scurvy and other diseases. The bitter cold proved too much for others. And they began to die. The sick often had to care for those who were even sicker. Husbands lost wives, and parents lost children. And as spring began to make its appearance, only fifty-one of them remained. Twenty-two men, four women, and twenty-six of the children.

These hardy souls, these men and women, girls and boys, these were and are our spiritual ancestors. These first Congregationalists to set foot on these shores stayed together, covenanting to support one another and because of that, we are here. We exist. And while I don't know if my wife Linda's ancestor John Billington, or Mary Brewster, or any of the others in that band of pilgrims ever said, "together we can," that spirit most certainly informed their lives and their existence. Elder William Brewster and his wife Mary had two children, one named Love, the other named Wrestling, and no doubt it was their common love for God that held them together as a community, even when they were wrestling with one another over their future. But together they remained. And together they lived out the gospel of Jesus as best they could. Indeed, recognizing the needs of others like the orphans who came with them and the adults who were not members of the congregation who needed a new start, a

fresh start. And working together they fed the hungry, and clothed the naked, and tended to the sick because in each one they recognized the presence of Christ

In some ways, 2020 has been like that Atlantic crossing and that first winter in Plimouth. It has been a time marked by rough seas and much sickness. People have died, some quite unexpectedly. There have been many who have gone hungry, and others who have been left without work. It has been a time of coming to grips with who we really are as a nation. It has been a rough year. But we, my friends, we who are covenanted together as the Sanibel Congregational United Church of Christ, we have hung together. We have learned new ways of living out our life as a congregation. We have learned new skills and new ways of sharing worship. In Zoom classes and on conference calls and in other conversations, we have wrestled with serious issues like racism and poverty. We have found new ways to support those in need. And we have done it together. With a real can-do attitude.

And so, we come to our annual season of stewardship. We come to that time when in every year we consider our many blessings, and offer up our thanks in and through our pledges to support the life and work of the church. We consider how we can give our time to the many efforts of this congregation. We think on how we can best use our talents to advance the work of Jesus in this time and place. And we weigh out what our financial support of the church will be in the coming year.

Yes, we come to this season, this time, every year--but this year, this strange and oftentimes difficult year, we come to it with a new sense of urgency. For some wonder what our church--not the building, but the people and the mission--what our church will look like in the years ahead. Will we still be physically distanced? Will we continue to expand our use of technology? How will we further our work supporting missions? Will we be able to staff in the same ways? Will we be able to sing as a congregation?

These are real and pressing questions. Yet we are far from the only congregation facing such challenges, nor the first congregation to face great concerns. Just ask that band of pilgrims from Scrooby. But by keeping focused on their mission to find the presence of Christ in the world around them, by continuing their efforts to meet the needs of the least among them, by feeding the hungry, tending the sick, reaching out to the displaced, they were able to not just survive, but in time to thrive. And a year after they landed on Cape Cod, they were able to offer up to God words of gratitude on that first Thanksgiving, despite the losses and hardships they had endured.

And so can we. Working together, with God as our guide and Jesus as our model, we can continue to meet the challenges of our day and our time. But it will take each one of us doing

the best we can. It will take each one of us being willing to give of ourselves and of our resources for the greater good.

Whenever we take in new members, we share together our church covenant--for like those early Congregationalists, we are not bound together by a hierarchy, but rather by promises "solemnly and mutually" entered into by each one of us as members of this congregation. We bind ourselves together--with each other and with God. "In the presence of God," we say, "we solemnly join together to be a living church of our Lord Jesus Christ." A living church. One committed to serving all people with mercy and justice. One dedicated to promoting God's kingdom here on earth through greater love and understanding. One striving to protect birds, animals, land, plants and people. To that end, we promise to dedicate our time, our talents and our treasure.

That's what we say. That's what we promise.

And together, together my friends, we can.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

John H. Danner