

## Piety in Plymouth

By [Rev. Bill Spanjer, Jr.](#)

Just a couple of weeks ago, I had the privilege to chaperone my Junior and Senior classes on a field trip to Plymouth and to Boston. What an incredible feeling it is to stand where the pilgrims stood as they entered this strange new world filled with hopes and fears, but most of all with resolve, strengthened by their faith in the Triune God. We stood there with 11th and 12th graders in awe together of the amazing sacrifices that were made by those pilgrims and by so many after them, leaving us the inheritance of a land of freedom and prosperity.

Piety is an old-fashioned word that has fallen out of use in our culture, but one that describes a fundamental virtue, namely that of bestowing honor and reverence upon those to whom it is due. We recalled what drew the pilgrims here, not opportunities for prosperity, but a determined disconnection from many worldly temptations and the opportunity to set their minds and lives on God himself. This set them on a trip that lasted 66 days before they reached Cape Cod where they anchored offshore of what is today, Provincetown and later off the coast of Plymouth. Ours was a trip filled with piety. How could it have been otherwise?

And yet, it is not our nature to be pious or thankful for what we have. Paul, in instructing the Corinthians to this end, asks them, "what do you have that you have not received?" It is the question we posed to the students at the first chapel. In other words, he asks them what is there for which they ought not be grateful, for which they ought not give honor to the one who made it possible? Everything we have and are, we owe at least in part to someone else and ultimately to God Himself. Again, Paul instructs the Romans by telling them that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men and yet when he goes on later in the text to describe that ungodliness, his diagnosis is surprising. Rather than listing out the great evils of mankind that we might expect and which he does later recount, he says that the fundamental problem with mankind is that they, "neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him." That is, there is a root problem with man behind all of the particular evils, namely impiety or thanklessness.

We see it in the Garden of Eden at the first temptation where Adam and Eve are deceitfully offered the possibility of autonomy and independence from God. "You will be like God," Satan said to them. That is, he held out the possibility of never having to say thank you again. They wouldn't have to; they would be gods themselves. We have been suffering from this delusion ever since. This is why, as parents, we must incessantly grab our children by the collar as they run off

after receiving a gift from someone, or a ride home, or anything else, and remind them, “what do we say...?” It does not come naturally. Which makes the celebration of Thanksgiving so wonderful.

Of course, we ought to be giving thanks without ceasing, but it is good to have days and seasons where we do so with intentionality. It is also good for us to look back and give thanks for the particular sacrifices of the first pilgrims who act as strong models for us to follow. Afterall, they are well known for their thanksgiving feast, a feast they held after a year of real disaster and suffering.

While we were in Plymouth, we had the opportunity to go aboard a detailed replica of the Mayflower. One hundred and two passengers below decks in unbelievably cramped space in the midst of rough seas for 66 days was a picture difficult to imagine. Their timing was unfortunate also as they arrived in November of 1620 and had to face a Northeastern winter with few supplies. This misfortune led to half of their party dying over that winter, reducing their number to 52 before setting out on the task of preparing fields for harvest in order to avoid the same disaster in the coming year. Add to these challenges, the reality of native tribes who resisted their presence and threatened to attack them.

And yet... 52 had survived. Providentially and unexpectedly, they met a member of the Wampanoag tribe, Squanto, who actually knew some English and made it possible to negotiate peace with the tribe and to form an alliance against other enemy parties. They were able to make dwellings, clear fields, and plant a harvest that provided the necessary stability to survive the oncoming winters ahead. So, when they gathered the harvest of 1621, they did what Christians do. They gave thanks to their God even with the pangs of recent suffering still being felt.

May we, as a community together, pray for the virtue of piety and may we use this Thanksgiving season to cultivate and strengthen that virtue by honoring the sacrifices of the pilgrims and more importantly the God that they sought to honor by their sacrifices. For, “what do you have, that you have not received?”

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