

Christianity in the Age of Spirit
Series 1: Pilgrim's Progress
Part 3: How does the Holy Spirit guide us on our journey?

by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes
September 24, 2017

Scripture: Joel 2:26-29; Matthew 12:46-50
Reading: Excerpt from *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman

I. Pilgrim Vision

*We live in a time of profound anxiety and turmoil. Many are led to despair.
Some even believe that the end of the world is near.
But others believe it is not the end of the world we are experiencing,
but the beginning of a new one –
a world marked by closer connection to God, to our community, and to the earth.
According to these believers, our present chaos
is but one of many signs that the birth of this new era is immanent, which
some call the **Age of Spirit**.
If this is true, then I want to be one of those people of Spirit
who welcome the Spirit's work among us and help bring God's vision to fruition.
And if not, then I hope at the very least to be found faithful to the God who
inspires in me the desire to be one of these people of Spirit.*

How about you?

- Eric Elnes

In our reading from the prophet Joel this morning, we find direct testimony – one of many such testimonies in Scripture – that there are times in human history when people experience God's Spirit in a more direct and life-changing way than other times. I don't know if God's Spirit is actually more present in one era versus another, yet at times it does seem that some sort of critical mass is reached of people waking up to the fact that the material world represents only a small fraction of what is really going on. As the prophet Joel predicts, our elders begin to dream dreams and our youth see visions, rich and poor alike, the powerful and the powerless.

On a far vaster scale than "normal," people begin to orient their lives around the values of the Kingdom of Heaven rather than the values of the particular political,

cultural, or economic group that keeps insisting upon people's submission. When all this dreaming and visioning happens, therefore, it leads ultimately to a new and profound blossoming of the human spirit, but in the short-run it creates chaos and disruption.

The last time this kind of blossoming happened was during the Great Reformation – whose 500th anniversary we celebrate in October. This was a period marked by such widespread blossoming that the long-established religious system couldn't handle the shock. So it split in two – dividing between Protestants and Catholics. This split was soon followed by a number of other splits among the Protestants who had broken off from the Catholic Church, as more and more people tried to wrap their heads around what was going on.

There are many who believe that we are in the midst of another great human blossoming which is again turning the long-established political, cultural, and economic status quo on its head, thereby creating opportunities that have not been possible in many centuries, if ever before.

If this is true, then it is especially helpful for us to be looking back as well as forward – back to the last time the prophet Joel's vision intersected everyday reality. For those of us in the United Church of Christ, it is particularly helpful to look back to our Congregationalist forbearers – later called Pilgrims – to see how they responded to the last great human flowering. For indeed, there is much wisdom to be gained from their experience that may provide a clearer lens through which to view the events of our day.

Congregationalism originated during the Reformation in 16th Century England, largely as a result of taking Martin Luther's "priesthood of all believers" more seriously than even the Lutherans did. Congregationalists believed that all people were equally capable of receiving and responding to the Holy Spirit. In other words, spiritual wisdom was in no way limited to a "holy few." Such wisdom and insight was available to the masses – anyone, in fact, who turned their lives over to God and welcomed the Spirit's guidance.

This understanding had enormous implications for everyday "believers" which included how their churches were governed. No longer was it necessary to have some form of hierarchy external to the churches themselves determine the direction or beliefs of those "lower on the totem pole." In fact, the "totem pole" was exactly reversed. According to Congregationalists, the local church was the highest power on the "totem pole," constituting the "fullest expression of the

Body of Christ on earth" (Rev. John Cotton). The lowest powers were denominational leaders and officials.

While this understanding led to even greater human flowering among those who took it seriously, it sent the Church of England into apoplexy. And why wouldn't it? Suddenly, the Church of England's Bishops and Archbishops were thrust to the bottom of the power structure. And those who were paying attention soon realized that Congregationalism had not only religious implications but political ones. If they didn't act quickly, the ruling elite in England would find themselves on the bottom of society's power structure as well. Thus, Church and State conspired against the Congregationalists, leading many to flee to Holland, and then America, to escape persecution.

As the direct descendants of the Congregationalist Pilgrims, we in the United Church of Christ continue in the spirit of this Congregationalist "blossoming." All major decisions concerning the direction of our congregation are decided by our congregation as a whole, in a congregational meeting. Once a congregational decision is made, it is treated as God's word – for us, not necessarily other churches, who must themselves be in conversation with the Spirit.

When the world looks at Countryside's partnership with the Tri-Faith Initiative, therefore, our actions cannot be explained with reference to any Bishop, Conference Minister, or denominational body who made the decision for us. The way we govern ourselves makes it plain and clear that it was a movement of the Holy Spirit.

II. De-Generation and Re-Generation

When we consider the original Congregationalist Pilgrims who landed in America, we admittedly look back with mixed emotions. On the one hand, they established the greatest democracy the world had ever seen and, in the eyes of many, the greatest form of Church governance that had existed since the time of Jesus and the early church. On the other hand, in hindsight, we are all well aware of what happened to the Native Americans who had welcomed the Pilgrims in peace and so dramatically come to their aid in their hour of need. We are also aware of the fact that many of the Pilgrim's descendants became slaveholders.

It seems hard to imagine how the original Pilgrim vision that all people are equal before God, equally capable of receiving and responding to the Holy Spirit, could act in such oppressive ways – especially when they had fled religious and political

persecution themselves. These developments have caused many in our society to dispose of all admiration and respect for our Pilgrim ancestors.

I find this rejection sad. It's sad because the problem was not with the Pilgrim's spiritual vision. The problem was that the Pilgrims procreated! They gave birth to scores of descendants who may have been *biologically* related to the pilgrims, but they did not carry on the spiritual relationship. It is a problem that goes back at least as far as the time of Jesus when he asked, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*" (Matthew 12:46-50)

To take Jesus's words seriously, we must recognize that the true descendants of the Pilgrims were not their biological progeny. Rather they were those who accepted and carried forward the Pilgrim vision whether they were biologically related or not. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that there has been an unbroken line of inheritance of the Pilgrim vision since they first arrived on American soil.

While the United Church of Christ is not the only denomination to carry forward the vision of their Pilgrim ancestors, the Pilgrim vision is crystal clear in our denominational history. As I mentioned two weeks ago, a great many of our Congregationalist ancestors were the very ones who fought hard to abolish slavery and ordained the first African-American Protestant minister in history. They were also the ones who fought for women's suffrage and ordained the first woman in history. On down the line of U.S. history, you can find these spiritual pilgrims working for equality and freedom for all people, not just the select few. In recent history, this has included taking leadership roles in the Civil Rights movement, and in even more recent history, leadership in the movement for LGBT equality. We were the first Christian denomination to ordain an openly gay minister, and the first to affirm same-sex marriage.

In each of these cases and many more, those who were *spiritually* related to the Pilgrims broke forms of bondage that had existed for centuries and created the possibility for a new flowering of human spirit. If anyone were to see all this in our United Church of Christ history and respond, "Yes, but what is the UCC doing today to continue the pilgrim vision," nearly every leader in our denomination who knows about Countryside Community Church – which is quite a large number now – would point to Countryside's critical partnership in Omaha's Tri-Faith Initiative as the preeminent example.

What we are doing here in Omaha is not just a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but a once-in-a-*millennium* opportunity. And, once we are all together on the Tri-Faith Commons and the Initiative has a chance to truly flower, we will all be part of an even greater work of the Spirit – literally opening possibilities for peace and human flowering that have not existed since the foundation of each of the three faiths. If that's not "Pilgrim," I don't know what is!

As some have observed, the movement that undergirds the Tri-Faith Initiative would have made sense at any time in human history, but it makes no greater sense than in today's dangerous and chaotic world. You and I are not only the products of the Pilgrim's vision, we are its servants.

III. Winter to Spring

When the original Pilgrims landed on American soil in 1620, it is easy to imagine how joyful and buoyant they were. They had put their bodies and souls into living God's vision by leaving their homeland and making a dangerous voyage across the ocean. Surely, many expected that their efforts would be rewarded by peace and prosperity in the "New World." Instead, what they encountered was winter – not just a winter of darkness and cold, but a dark winter of the soul. Disease set in. So did famine. No small number died. Surely, their experience must have rocked the confidence of many – harder than at any other time in their lives. Had they responded to a true vision from the Spirit? Or, was God punishing them for doing something wrong?

In hindsight, we can all look back and see that they were indeed carrying out the Spirit's work, and doing so with extraordinary faithfulness. But how many would have seen it back then, amidst such formidable challenges?

At the conclusion of worship today, we will all be getting a first-hand view of the early fruits of our Pilgrim vision in the form of a beautiful new church whose foundations are being laid even now. I can't tell you how excited I am for you to see the drawings!

Yet we will also find that, just as we are literally entering winter time in Omaha (despite the unseasonable warmth), we have our own formidable challenges that must be overcome if we, like our ancestors, are to move from winter to spring in safety and strength.

I'll leave it to our amazing lay leaders to describe these challenges in detail, but for now I want to leave you with this reminder of three things our ancestors did to overcome their challenges and move not just themselves but our nation forward:

First, those who were healthy ministered to the sick.

Second, those who had a little more food than others boldly shared what they had with those who had less.

Third, they prayed. They prayed, trusting that if God's Spirit was still working among them, then they could expect the unexpected. God would continue to work in their midst in ways that not even the most spiritually-centered among them could predict.

And God did just that, in the form of the Native American peoples who compassionately shared from their resources when they could have just as easily wiped them off the face of the earth.

I place great faith in our spiritual heritage just as I have great faith in our congregation and our God. We are Pilgrims. If we act like Pilgrims, we will make it well beyond winter into a glorious future.

I leave you with this reminder from Russian writer and journalist Vasily Grossman whose words capture the essence of how God's Spirit was at work among the Pilgrims, the Native Americans, and the person sitting in the pew next to you this morning:

I have seen that it is not man who is impotent in the struggle against evil, but the power of evil that is impotent in the struggle against man. The powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, is the secret of its immortality. It can never be conquered. The more stupid, the more senseless, the more helpless it may seem, the vaster it is. Evil is impotent before it. The prophets, religious teachers, reformers, social and political leaders are impotent before it. This dumb, blind love is man's meaning.

Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil, struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed, even now, even evil will never conquer.

(From *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman, cited by Chris Hedges in his book, *Empire of Illusion*, p. 191.)