"Meaning and Migration"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
October 21, 2018

In writing this sermon, the words of poet Warshan Shire moved like an ancient Greek chorus through my thoughts.

Noone no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark.

And I begin to wonder if this fear holds true for my own immigrant ancestors . . . for the ancestors who founded this town and this church more than 375 years ago. What does it mean that many of the group of English colonial settlers who arrived here came together from the same part of England?

you only run for the border
when you see the whole city
running as well.

Among these families were the Curtis's, Grouts, Stones, Haynes, Noyes, Bents, and Goodenows. According to my brother, the chief genealogist in our family, our ancestors include multiple founders of this town. For example, my grandmother was a Root. Her grandmother was a Locke. And her grandmother was a Bent, Lydia Messinger Bent. Lydia Bent's grandfather was Joel Bent. Joel's grandfather was Hopestill Bent, resident of Wayland and proprietor of the Hopestill Bent Tavern—which still exists as a red house beside the high school. And, Hopestill's grandfather, John Bent, was a founder of this town and this church. In other words, I am three grandmothers and three grandfathers descended from the founders of Wayland (or Sudbury Plantation as it was then known).

Sometimes I think my ancestors would be pleased to know that their descendent had become the minister here centuries later. Then I recall that these were *Puritans* who would not be impressed by my liberal theology *or* by my gender.

In the book, *The History of Sudbury, 1638-1889,* author Alfred S. Hudson describes these Puritan founders and their reasons for emigrating. He writes:

> They were Puritans both in theory and practice; and afar from the conveniences and luxuries of their native land, sought in a new country a home remote from ecclesiastical and political strife. They embarked for America at a time when

© Stephanie May 2018

> England was in an unsettled condition, and when ship after ship was bringing to these shores some of her purest and staunchest citizens. [my emphases]

While the language may be dated, the sentiment within suggests motivations for emigration not dissimilar from many of today's immigrants—they were seeking a safer place for themselves and their children.

you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

In the decades prior to the Puritan's immigration, England had been rife with political conflict. Of course, since this was but a hundred years from the start of the Protestant Reformation, much of the *political* strife emerged from *religious* difference. While Puritans did enjoy some seats in Parliament, King Charles I, who became king in 1625, was no friend of the Puritans. Rather than accommodate Puritan desires to reform the Church of England, Charles reinforced and even expanded religious practice and leadership in ways that were directly opposite those envisioned by the Puritans. Then, in the 1630's Charles removed Puritan clergy from the Church of England. When some Puritans spoke out and wrote criticisms of Charles for his actions, they were imprisoned for sedition. One critic had his ears cut off. Another critic was flogged, dragged behind an oxcart, and made to stoop in a pillory.

no one leaves home unless home chases you,
fire under feet,
hot blood in your belly.

Given this politically and religiously hostile environment, the Puritans made plans to leave. First, in 1630 a group sailed for Boston. And, within the same decade, a group of Puritans arrived on the ship *Confidence* and made their way here.

In England, John Bent and his wife Martha, mother of their five children under twelve, decided that they too would leave. Can you imagine loading your five young kids into a 17th century wooden boat to cross the Atlantic?

no one would put their children in a boat
unless the sea is safer than the land

And yet, they came: families, bachelors, and widows. They came to flee a dangerous life. They came to build a new life. In his *History of Sudbury,* Hudson writes,

© Stephanie May 2018

> The church was of paramount importance to the early new England inhabitants. For its privileges they had in part embarked for these far-off shores. To preserve its purity they became pilgrims on earth, exiles from friends and their native land.

They came with the hope of something better for themselves and their children. They came to worship God as they believed they must. Perhaps this need rings hollow to our religiously liberal ears that support a pluralism of belief and practice. But for the Puritans whose faith in God drove a sense of fear and longing to 'get it right', they strove fervently to please their divine sovereign. Caught between the compulsion of an earthly king to follow the Church of England and their Puritan understanding of a different way, they felt that had to follow the path of God.

no one spends days and nights in the cold bladder of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.

In 1639, the settlers began to build a town patterned off the English countryside that they had known as home all of their lives. By 1640, the Rev. Edmund Browne was serving as 'sometime minister of this church'—as the sign [on the wall of the sanctuary] reads. In 1643, the First Meetinghouse was constructed a few rods north of where we are. A sign marks the location beside the Old North Cemetery where my ancestor Hopestill Bent rests among centuries of Wayland residents, including those we have known and loved.

And yet, it is important to also note that speaking of these European colonial settlers as "immigrants" does not entirely ring true. Earlier this weekend, I listened to my friend, the Rev. Clyde Grubbs, deliver a paper about the myth of the vanishing Indian. A life-long Unitarian, a Cherokee, and an activist, Grubbs noted that the white colonial settlers came as armed invaders. "Immigrants", suggested Grubbs, do not arrive with mercenaries who train communities to form armed militia as John Winthrop did when he began the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Listening to Grubbs can remind us how much we likely have to learn about white settler colonialism. We must hold this knowledge alongside our connections to people who for centuries have journeyed here to live and work and shape the life of this nation. What we know today as the United States has been indelibly imprinted by immigrants from many places. Some of us *are* immigrants. Some are children or grandchildren of immigrants. And some of us may trace our lineage back to colonial settlers. Some of us may also have ancestors who were forced to immigrate here as enslaved persons. Or, perhaps some of us trace a lineage to indigenous tribes who have lived on this land long before any immigrants.

© Stephanie May 2018

Remembering whatever ways that we too are connected to immigration can impact how we think about current immigration policies. Of course, throughout U.S. history immigration policy has been awash in fears and prejudices about who does and does not *really* belong here. Again and again in the news from the U.S. as well as from Europe, we hear messages telling immigrants they don't belong and to just 'go home.'

But how do you go home to places such as those poet Warshan Shire describes?

prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is safer than fourteen men
who look like your father

How might we help critics of immigration to consider *why* a person might be willing to risk so much to come here? Here to a place where immigrants so often face such fierce resistance to their very presence.

the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
…they smell strange
savage messed up their own country
and now they want
to mess up ours?

Indeed, in a column this week in the South China Morning Post out of Hong Kong, Chinese-American Chi Wang writes that if he were a young Chinese student today, he's not sure he would choose to stay here as he once did years ago. He writes,

> I hope the situation in the US will improve, that calmer voices will prevail and American diversity will once more be embraced. However, I am not sure that a new president would even be enough to change things. Hate and prejudice have now seeped into the mainstream.

© Stephanie May 2018

If hate and prejudice are the mainstream, then I want to be part of the minority. I read again this week how when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. died, his *disapproval* rating was nearly 75%. Sometimes being in the minority is the right place to be.

Where do you want to be? In our current political climate, its difficult to remain neutral. But perhaps it can be too easy to be indifferent. There's just so much to do. So many different issues. How can we effectively help on them all?!? We certainly cannot all be full-time activists. And no one of us will ever individually 'fix' a social or political issue.

Still, I wonder what happens when we simply ask what *can* I do? Learn more about immigration news, policy, or history? Show love and kindness to immigrants that you know—including those that are part of our community here? Or, maybe you're interested in getting more involved in immigration issues by training to accompany immigrants to court? (Either Barbara from the Uganda Project OR Rachel from the Immigration Justice Committee can tell you more about this and other ways to be an ally and advocate.)

When we live in a world of people fleeing the mouth of the shark, I hope we will consider in what ways we *can* be part of creating sanctuary and shelter for those in need of safety. And, as we continue to befriend and support immigrants in our communities, may we have compassion and respect for the extraordinary journeys undertaken to be here. While we may not be privy to all of the details, may we see in the face of every person from the new immigrant to the descendant of a colonial settler the full humanity of each person as they chose what they need to do to survive, to be safe, and, hopefully, to find love and belonging.

As a congregation begun by immigrants, I hope we will do none thing less.

So may it be.
Amen.

© Stephanie May 2018