

“Memory, Gratitude, Remorse, and Resolve”

The Thanksgiving Sunday Homily
At the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
On November 22, 2009
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

There is a new documentary film out about Lydia Maria Child, produced by a California film-maker, Constance Jackson, narrated by the actress Diahann Carroll, and featuring numerous shots of the First Parish in Wayland, both of the front of the meetinghouse and of the pews in this room. Repeatedly, when they need an image on screen when religion or the churches of the time are mentioned, there we are again; and for one fleeting moment, when they need an image of a preacher, I appear.

The film is called “Over the River ... Life of Lydia Maria Child: Abolitionist for Freedom” I thank Tom and Jane Sciacca for lending me their copy. It is much about the issues of the era – from the beginnings of the struggle for the emancipation of slaves and the abolition of slavery in the 1820s through the Civil War and into the years thereafter, including a picture of the home here in Wayland, on Sudbury Road, where Child and her husband David moved to be with her father, who later died, as then did David. Child lived on in the house until her death in 1880, twenty-five years after moving here.

As anyone who has been attending services here for a while can attest, I am capable of sharing the many accomplishments of her remarkable life at the drop of a hat and at length. Even so, there are some achievements I have barely mentioned, as major as they were: founding the first magazine for children; authoring the best-selling guide, *The Frugal Housewife*; writing the first history of the condition of women everywhere, in two volumes, and a three-volume introduction the world’s major religions. And so forth.

Mostly we dwell on her vital role in the movement for emancipation and abolition. But she was also much the champion of American Indians, a cause that comes to mind as Thanksgiving nears. It is a fine holiday, celebrated by some as a rare celebration that has nothing to do with a war, nationalism, or some famous person; but one that carries with it in the minds of many a mythology they learned as children, one about a “first Thanksgiving” when native Americans and British subjects fairly newly

arrived sat down in what we now call Plymouth to feast together in friendship.

And it is not all that far-fetched a myth, except it wasn't a Thanksgiving ceremony – the Pilgrims would not have one of those for a while. It was a ceremony called a harvest home, and it was celebrated together, Pilgrim and native, and the feast was owed to the help the natives had provided the new folk, there was a harmony, and it was one that would last for a while, the Pilgrims being happy just to be on their own, while the Puritans here in Massachusetts Bay Colony were quickly joined by a swarm of settlers whose settlements spread ever-deeper inland.

But Indians have every right to have unhappy associations when it comes to the arrival of so-called white people. Already, before that first harvest home, European illnesses against which the natives did not have immunity had decimated the tribes, in some cases literally decimating them, with a 10% survival rate.

The historian Carolyn Karcher notes in the documentary that Maria Child “learned at a youthful age to identify with ... groups excluded from the ‘inalienable rights’ America’s founding creed promised to ‘all men.’

“The first such group to awaken young Lydia’s sympathies” – Lydia being her given name; upon coming of age she had herself baptized as Maria [pron. ma.RY.a], and that was the name she used ever after – “were the Abenaki Indians she encountered in Maine, where she lived for six years after her mother’s death.... Driven off their land and reduced to destitution, yet blamed for their own plight by the very white settlers who occupied their territory, the Abenakis opened Lydia’s eyes to her country’s plundering of the Indians.”

This homily is titled, “Memory, Gratitude, Remorse, and Resolve.” Thanksgiving is a time for family gatherings and a national holiday, a time for remembering, and with that comes the gratitude for all the goodness life has graced us with, individually, as families, as a country, as a world. True, for some people it may be hard to focus on the blessings, if there is much weighing on the other side of the balance. But surely it is good to pause and note what good things there have been and are in our lives, and for many of us that side of the balance is heavy with good fortune.

And then there’s the remorse, the memory of family times that did not go well, of personal failings, and of national shame, even local shame. The film points out that by 1641 – two years after this town was settled – “Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth were the first colonies to authorize slavery through legislation as part of the ‘Body of Liberties.’”

Two centuries later it had long since been banned here up north, but the shameful institution lived on in the south, was spreading to the west, with defenders strong in Congress; and even in the north, there was resistance to ending a southern practice which provided cotton for the mills and consequent wealth.

Maria Child was not one to merely rue the situation. No, her remorse was coupled with resolve. She teamed with William Lloyd Garrison, her husband David, and others to challenge slavery, to demand its abolition, in fact to insist on full freedom for people of every color or race to enter into society, to be educated, to vote, to intermarry, everything.

So let us return to young Lydia, whose eyes have been opened to the awful damage done to the Abenakis of Maine. She could not but feel remorse at their plight, but with it came resolve. As Maria, Karcher goes on, “she would agitate for a fair and humane Indian policy throughout her life, beginning in 1829 with her protest against the forced ‘removal’ of the Cherekees from their native Georgia to Oklahoma ... and ending in 1870 with her outraged denunciation of the brutal war being waged on the Plains Indians.”

Actually, her positive regard for native Americans was manifested publicly long before the Cherekees’ Trail of Tears, in her first book, the novel, *Hobomok, A Tale of Early Times*, published in 1824 when she was 22. It features a romance and marriage between a young Puritan woman and an Indian, with whom she has a child. Other things happen, but her belief that people of every sort should know equal rights and enjoy each others’ society is as central to the book as it was to her effort after the Civil War to help ex-slaves gain the vote and a full place in society. That first year, she put together an anthology of writings, *The Freedman’s Book*, which both acknowledged the causes for national remorse, that blacks had been treated so horribly, but also sought to stoke the resolve to overcome the disadvantages slavery had burdened them with. It featured many black writers.

Gratitude, remorse, and resolve – having them all goes on being the challenge. Come Thanksgiving, some do not want to have the festivities interrupted by any mention of what was done to Indians over the years, the brutality, the betrayals, the thievery, the lies, not on Thanksgiving, not ever. And some want everything to stop so the spotlight is on the case for remorse and stay there.

I say, remorse is in order, but partnered with what gratitude may be due for goodnesses along the way, and paired with resolve, a determination to see justice and fairness and good will among all.

May I suggest in closing that we all have that same work to do with ourselves, that there are things we ought to feel remorse about, setting aside rationalizations and excuses and acknowledging error; but like Maria Child, not being content just to rue, but to pair remorse with resolve, the resolve to repair, to heal, to improve as we can; and partner them both with gratitude for all the goodnesses that have been ours despite our shortcomings, and that will be with us on Thanksgiving and beyond.

So may it be.