

Old and New

Amos 5:14-15, Matthew 5:17-26

Center Church, Hartford

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Traditionally, Center Church celebrates Founders Day in October. We welcome the Footguard to remember back when our Meetinghouse was indeed **the** meeting place for Hartford as it grew and moved with the creation of a new nation. We remember Thomas Hooker and the others more than a hundred years before the founding of the United States who came across the sea, in those days, not a trivial journey. **They came because they were troublemakers in England**, disagreeing with the religious authorities on many issues, both theological and political. They then traveled through the wilderness on dirt tracks or no roads at all, men, women, children, animals, to settle in a place they'd never seen, starting all over again after starting all over again in Cambridge two years before. I love the George Leon Walker quote at the start of your bulletin that "The settlers of the Bay Colony [and I would add our ancestors who then transplanted here] were [people] of strong character and pronounced opinions." (*History of First Church of Hartford*)

Why do we take time to remember them? Why do we set aside a Sunday to look back? Is it to take pride in all that our ancestors accomplished, ignoring some of the things they did that we would rather not know (did you know Samuel Stone, Hooker's associate and later Pastor here, whose statue stands outside by the Ancient Burying Ground, took part in witch trials?)? Do we look back to get all nostalgic for the better days, when what became Center Church was indeed at the Center of life in Hartford in almost every way? Is it, perhaps, to remind ourselves that we come from people "of strong character and pronounced opinions?"

Each of us needs to answer those questions for ourselves. I'm a pastor, a citizen of the state of Connecticut, a part-time resident of Hartford, and a historian by training. When I look back on the past, I do so with both a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of generosity. Let me explain. That wonderful word "hermeneutic," (isn't it fun to say? Try it!) means the method by which we interpret something. Scripture, literature, movies, people's actions, the world, history. A hermeneutic of suspicion means that

I read history and hear stories and don't take everything at face value. I know, especially as a woman, that there are a multitude of untold stories from the past, voices unheard, points of view that were squelched and forgotten. I think it is critical for us to look at our history that way.

I also, however, bring a hermeneutic of generosity (I get that term from Paul Farmer). Our ancestors did not know what we know now about so many things: science, human development, people in other parts of the world or people here who were not like them. While that does not for a second excuse things like slavery or persecution of those accused of witchcraft or those who were gay or lesbian or Native peoples, it does make me pause in my condemnation and righteous anger for a moment to ask what I can learn from what they did, not just condemn what they did. Where are my blind spots today? All have sinned and fall short of the glory, as Paul says, which is the basis for a hermeneutic of generosity toward others, and ourselves.

What can we learn from taking a moment to remember our ancestors? To use the language from Amos, here at Center Church we are the remnant of the Hookers and their companions. Amos said that the remnant of Joseph would find favor with God if they "hate evil and love good, and establish justice at the city gates." We do not want to be like those of our ancestors who killed Native Americans and took their land, condemning them because they were thought to be savages because they did not dress, speak, worship or live like good English Puritans. We do not want to be like those of our ancestors who bought and sold human beings as slaves, as several clergy and lay members here did. We do not want to be like those of our ancestors who told women to be quiet, both in their religious opinions and in their suffering of abuse.

We recognize that these were part of our storied past, and I think I can declare clearly on our behalf that we abhor and reject these thoughts and actions and have learned from them as we live into relationships with each other and those in our community who worship or live differently than we do.

We also, however, can find courage and insight from those strong characters who were not afraid to share their opinions even when it meant speaking uncomfortable truths to power. You know those early Puritans did not only fight with the Church of England, they fought with each other, regularly! They were not afraid to disagree, publicly, as they discerned how

God was calling them to form a society in this new land. They bravely left England because **they wanted to do something new and they had to leave people who only wanted things to stay the same**. It is so ironic that now Connecticut is known as the Land of Steady Habits (there's a new TV show about a family in CT with that title!). Perhaps what we need to learn from the past is a bit of that adventurousness, that willingness to risk on a pretty big scale, which our ancestors had in abundance.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus often teaches with this formula: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times...but I say to you..." And every time he does that, he affirms the teachings of the past but then pushes them further, not just "don't murder," but "don't stay angry and break relationships with others." As we celebrate Founders Day, can we affirm those strong characters with pronounced opinions but then take it further and move boldly into discovering what new territory God may be calling us to inhabit now? Center Church is NOT the Ancient Burying Ground. And Samuel Stone's statue, which we will walk past in a few moments, is not standing stock still, but pointing forward. He had no idea where the church would go, (and would certainly be appalled to find me in this pulpit!) but he knew movement was mission critical.

The English poet William Wordsworth has a wonderful line in one of his poems: "And central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation." The church is not the central peace. God is. Trusting that God holds the center allows us to enter the endless agitation of our time with courage and strength, as did many of our ancestors. The question before us as we remember them is, what is our adventure to be? Amen.