"A Little Democracy"

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What were the Puritans thinking?!? Why did they get on ships and cross an ocean? Have you ever been on the replica of the Mayflower in Plymouth or other tall ships!? Have you experienced the waves in the Atlantic!? Just yesterday my weather app warned of riptides and ten-foot waves along the shores around Boston. Hopping a wooden ship across the Atlantic is not a risk-free proposition. What were they thinking!?

Growing up I didn't ask these questions. I only thought of the Puritans as heroes seeking religious freedom. Why? Because I grew up Calvinist. Which is to say the conservative Christian churches I grew up in were shaped by the teachings of 16th century Protestant reformer John Calvin and the wider Reformed tradition he inspired—including that of the Puritans who founded Boston. The theology I was taught at ages 8 and 18 was not dissimilar from that stressed by John Wilson and John Cotton, the first ministers of this congregation. Still, scholars of Calvin and the Reformed tradition could rightly point out the many ways my modern suburban life was far more relaxed than life would have been for folks in Calvin's *theocracy* in Geneva, Switzerland. This would certainly be true for theologian Michael Servetus who was executed for heresy in Geneva in 1553.

For me, growing up Calvinist meant a few things. One, I always felt guilty I wasn't doing enough to be good—there's a lot of anxiety when you're not certain if you're one of the few God has elected to be saved. (Although I have heard from others over the years that such religious guilt and anxiety is certainly not limited to Calvinism or even Christianity. Many of us carry religious wounds.)

Being Calvinist also meant the Christian Bible was very, very important. We were each expected to personally wrestle with the Bible as the source of authority to teach us not only how to understand God, but also how to understand ourselves, and the world in which we lived. As a teenager, my favorite Bible verse was from the book of Romans chapter 12 verse 2. It stated, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." I even made this t-shirt at summer camp. The fact that I still have this shirt tells you how important this verse was to me.

The impulse to question inherited patterns reflected in this verse is also deeply rooted in the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Protestants resisted the

ideas and the ecclesiastical authority of the Catholic Church which had defined Western Christianity for more than a millennia. And while England would become Protestant and form the Church of England, some people continued asking questions for how to faithfully live as Christians. In time, their persistent searching to live out their "purer" understanding of Christianity created a rift with the established Church of England.

This I understand. My own commitment to "renew my mind" separated me from the religious understandings of my Calvinist childhood. Through formal education as well as the important learning of new experiences and relationships with diverse people, I journeyed far from the ideas, people, and places that were my roots. The need to follow my questions and my longing for religious integrity compelled me on even when doing so created painful rifts with people I loved. So, given my personal experience, I never questioned why the Puritans risked crossing an ocean. They were simply following their spiritual need for authentic religious expression. They were seeking liberty to freely worship and live with integrity away from what they felt was the tyrannical control of bishops and the Church of England.

But, still, what *were* the Puritans thinking when they boarded those ships?! Just ten years earlier, 46 of the 100 emigrants had died over the first winter in Plymouth. And in Jamestown, only 60 of 500 settlers survived starvation in the winter of 1609-1610. In the 17th century, crossing an ocean to establish a new city was an incredibly risky endeavor.

In my understanding, the Puritans risked so much to board those wooden vessels and cross an ocean because they longed for a different way of being together in faithfulness to the God of their understanding. In her Minns Lecture series on covenant, the Rev. Alice Blair Wesley describes how the Puritans cleverly found a path to create a different way of governing their communities. According to Wesley, holding a charter from the King to form a business corporation meant that the board of that corporation could elect its own leaders, expand the membership of their board, and generally be self-governing as long as they did nothing illegal. Significantly, when the Puritans crossed the ocean with the charter for the Massachusetts Bay Company in hand, this made *here* not London the place that the corporate board would meet. As Wesley writes,

> "[N]ot too long after the people got the colony in North America established, the board of the corporation simply made every man of the churches—and some years later every owner of a piece of land, even a building lot—a member of the Company board, and so eligible to vote in annual elections choosing their governor. By these acts, they made the government of their royal colony, New England, in effect, a proto-democracy." (30)

"Proto-democracy" seems like a good word. For even as their creative use of the law greatly expanded access to voting and governance, clearly there were also limits to who could vote and participate in governance. Gender, church affiliation, property ownership, and whiteness were all factors of inclusion.

So also, governance *within* the churches reflected a structure that expanded participation while also retaining elements of hierarchy and exclusion. On the one hand, the practice of forming a church by signing a covenant promoted strong lateral relationships of mutuality. Covenants called for all parties to agree to the same set of values and actions. This differs from a contract where the parties agree to an exchange of goods or services that may not be the same—e.g. exchanging your labor for money. Covenants call for *mutual* promises to create a particular kind of community. As Wesley explains in her Minns Lecture, the Puritans just wanted to go somewhere they could "establish a whole community of free churches, without bishops." (30) They wanted the liberty to organize religious communities on their own terms, which they worked out together in a spirit of love, without a top-down official like a bishop telling them what they could and could not do. Rather, by organizing around a covenant, the members of the church elected their own leaders and managed their own affairs.

But, on the other hand, Unitarian Universalist historian Conrad Wright questions how truly equitable this proto-democracy was. He writes, "Since the church was a community of the Saints, all of them equal in spiritual standing, the result has all the appearance of a little democracy." (Wright, *Congregational Polity*, p.10) While this is inspiring, Wright cautions that this is at best a "partial truth" as the elders of the church (offices that included the ministers) held great sway. One Puritan minister described the situation as "A speaking aristocracy in the face of a silent democracy." (11) Given the lived practice of how power was really functioning, Wright suggests it may be more accurate to describe the rise of this congregational governance model as the *"adopt[ion of] institutional forms into which later generations could breathe a democratic spirit."*

In 2024, we cannot say that we have perfected the use of democracy in our congregations *or* our Commonwealth or nation. And yet, with democratic norms and voting access under strain in recent years, we are newly reminded of our deeply rooted connection to the use of the democratic process in our congregations and society at large. Democracy *is* a framework that affirms many of our core religious values—such as equity and justice, as well as the worth and dignity of each person to have a voice. Democracy also demands that we take seriously our interdependence. In a recent Substack post, historian Timothy Snyder, wrote,

> "Democracy is not an easy form of government. It has none of the certainties of the various forms of tyranny. It demands that the governed as well as the governing make compromises, learn to listen, and sometimes resist impulses."

At its core, engaging in the democratic process is about being in conversation with others about how to be together. In one of her Minns Lectures on covenant, Wesley recounts how the settlers in Dedham, Massachusetts spent a year talking with one another before forming their church and signing on to a covenant of mutual promises. While there are no transcripts of these conversations, the Dedham church records do list the questions that structured each meeting and conversation.

Learning this story about Dedham resonated deeply with me because over the summer I had begun deconstructing the 1630 Covenant of First Church Boston into a set of questions. In essence, I was reverse engineering the Dedham process. Looking at the text of our covenant, I tried to imagine what question each phrase or section the archaic language might be answering. I came up with a list of ten questions that we might also have today… even if we might use different language to pose the question or to answer it. These 10 questions will be forming our monthly themes over the next 10 months—more details will be shared in next week's Water Sunday service.

Going through this process of reading our 1630 Covenant as a set of questions made me wonder: could one of the lessons that the Puritans might teach us be the value of uncertainty and of asking questions of one another? Tyranny is full of certainty, warns Snyder. What if we also committed ourselves *not* to having all the answers, but rather to being in conversation with others as we work it through together in a spirit of love? At its best, this is how the democratic spirit could enliven the life of our congregation, our Commonwealth, and our nation.

However, I do want to add that even as I convey appreciation for elements of the Puritan story, I also strongly disagree with assumptions held by the Puritans and other European settlers that this land was "empty", "uncivilized," and a gift to them from God. "Settler Colonialism," as the practice is often referred to today, robbed Tribal nations of their ancestral land, provoked warfare that killed both Indigenous Peoples and Europeans, and ultimately forced Indigenous Peoples off their land, disrupting their way of life, culture, and sustainability as a people. This is an impact for which I believe repair work is long overdue.

And still, even as our Puritan roots were not fully inclusive or just, some of the institutional forms they began have enabled new practices to grow whereby power is shared more equitably among persons. We still have plenty of work to do in our congregation,

Commonwealth, and nation so that everyone has a voice in our shared conversation. Democracy may not be easy, but perhaps sometimes we all need to risk crossing oceans of uncertainty to seek liberty and to resist tyranny.

So may it be,
Amen