

**It is with real pleasure that we announce that Pastor Rob has won the coveted J. J. Russell Sermon Award for 2010, as announced at the NACCC Annual Meeting in Anchorage, Alaska. The topic assignment was "Congregationalism: Its Past and Future," and the title was "Which Mayflower Are We On?" Now you can embrace this sermon as well and decide for yourself which Mayflower we are on.**

## **"Which Mayflower Are We On?"**

Matthew 18:18-20

Grace Church of Columbiana, Ohio

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April 18, 2010

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Grace Church is a relative newcomer to the Congregational Christian movement, having joined the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches in June of 2006. Coming from German Evangelical Reformed roots we aren't familiar with the traditions, images and lingo of Congregationalists who have a 300 hundred year head start on us. Today we'll look at the signature image of our Association, and friends, it is a free association of churches, NOT a denomination. That image is the Mayflower. What does God mean to tell us through that image? What are we saying by using it?

The Mayflower is truly an icon: bringing intrepid pioneers of our faith to the windswept shore of New England, to land at what they would call New Plymouth, to first step ashore, as the story goes, on a rock that became known as "Plymouth Rock." The rock could have been our signature image, but it is not very romantic, appealing, active, or photogenic. Until recent years, because now it is under cover, it was usually wet, dark, covered with whatever the ocean washed up on it. People came with hammers and would take chips of it away until it was protected. Kind of as the ultimate graffiti it has the numbers 1620 sandblasted into it, remembering the year the Pilgrims landed. Plymouth Rock is one image as an association we could have adopted: hard, unyielding, immovable, unfeeling, unresponsive. It may even remind us of a few church members each of us has known, but it certainly does not adequately symbolize the lively, compassionate churches of Christ of our Association! All things considered, I'm really glad we picked the boat.

The Mayflower has always been a symbol of freedom for all Americans. Fleeing an oppressive English government and church, they left aboard the Mayflower and Speedwell, which ironically, did not speed well at all. The Speedwell kept springing leaks and after several false starts was left in England. The Mayflower was left to go it alone across the wide ocean, a journey of 66 seasick days to found a new colony in the New World. But is the Mayflower a good symbol for us to use?

You know there are a number of images in the Bible for the church. The church is the Bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7), a vine or vineyard (John 15:1-8), a flock of sheep (John 10:1-16), a kingdom (Colossians 1:13). The church is a household or family (Galatians 3:26; 4:6-7), a building or temple (2 Corinthians 5:1, Ephesians 5:20-22), or even a body, which is the most prominent image Paul uses (Ephesians 2:22,23). One thing all these images have in common is that of relationship. God is a husband, a vineyard owner, a shepherd, a king, a family member, a builder, the head of a body. When we switch to having a boat as an image of the church we see God is still in relationship. The might think of the Lord as the captain of the crew, or as the one who protects the ship.

The image of a boat for the church is not directly used in the Bible, but we can infer that meaning from several passages. It is an ark that saves Noah's family and a boatload of animals during the destructive flood (Genesis 6-8, and 1 Peter 3:20-21). The church is obviously an instrument of the Almighty used to save God's people from destruction in this life and the next. Also we have the example of Jesus preserving Peter's boat and the disciples riding in it, from destruction during a violent storm on the sea (Matthew 8:23-27). Jesus also spoke to the crowds from a boat, symbolizing the word of God going out from the church to the world. The boat was also a symbol used by the first Christians symbolizing their experience of being a refuge of faith being tossed about on a sea of unbelief, worldliness, and persecution. It was also a convenient secret symbol to all persecuted Christians. The mast looks like a small cross, hopefully unnoticed by the authorities.

Is the boat a good modern or post-modern symbol for the church? The word "nave" which we use in church to mean the main area where the congregation worships, is based on Latin and Greek words meaning "ship." You are in the hold. You are the cargo. You are the passengers and crew. We are a living ship, no doubt about it. And living faithfully in a close-knit small community of believers is a key post-modernist value.

If the Mayflower had a mission, and we use it as our image, what does that say about our mission? Is it the same? What was the mission of the Mayflower? Before and after it delivered Pilgrims to the New World, to exported goods such as hats and vinegar from England to other European countries, often bringing back a hold filled with barrels of wine. It's most precious cargo was the band of God's people called the Pilgrims, safely delivered to the New World, the only mission for which it is remembered.

As a church of God, with the Lord Jesus as our only head, are we doing the same thing? Are we working to take on new passengers, make them Pilgrims with New Life in Christ, help them on their Pilgrim journey of faith, and then deliver them safely to God's New World? To the degree we do that, is the degree that we fulfill our divine calling from the Lord. But the Mayflower, this ship that landed in 1620, only made this trip once. It was a limited mission. Then the Mayflower went back to delivering wine to England. Some of us might think that's a noble mission too, but not compared to delivering Pilgrims.

Did you know there have been other ships named "Mayflower"? I have found several Mayflowers. What can we learn from them?

The first Mayflower I found was in 1588. It was a warship a bit larger than the Mayflower of 1620. It was used to chase the Spanish Armada up the English Channel. Are we, as a church, a warship? Certainly sometimes the church has been called to contend for a great cause, for the sake of Christ. Certainly sometimes there has been internal conflict. But is conflict what we do best? I don't think so. I think what we do best is deliver Pilgrims.

There was a second ship Mayflower that made five trips across the Atlantic in 1629, 1630, 33, 34, and 39, delivering boatloads of Puritan Separatists to the New World, and finally disappearing on her last voyage, lost at sea in 1641. This was a ship that worked hard. It kept delivering God's Free People to the New World, until finally it failed. It literally died trying to fulfill its mission. I believe for God's church today, something can be learned from such persistence and effort and risk-taking.

There is the Mayflower II, the modern replica of that brave first Mayflower. It sits in Plymouth harbor, within sight of where its namesake landed. It was built after WWII and sailed from England to Plymouth harbor in 1957 to commemorate the first voyage. Perhaps some of us have been on it. Are we like this Mayflower? Are we only a museum ship? I think not. I pray not. As inspiring as

it is, it does not go anywhere. Because of the water it sits in it moves only a little more than Plymouth Rock.

Another Mayflower is a hot air balloon. Kevin Knapp is the pilot of the Mayflower Transit hot air balloon. He won a race with the Mayflower Transit in 2007, ascending to 12,000 feet where he could see both the east and west coasts of Michigan. This Mayflower did not deliver any Pilgrims. It can be a model of living in the Spirit. Being a balloon, the direction is entirely determined by the prevailing wind. Sailing ships at least determine where they go, even making their way up wind. Balloons can do no such thing. They are totally at the mercy and direction of the one who sends the wind. Are we, as a church, that open to God's direction? Do we dare take our hand off the tiller and ask God to steer us? How much do we trust? Or maybe that's just too foolish?

Finally there is a Mayflower that does not exist, at least, as yet. It's fictional. Mark Carew wrote a novel about NASA making an interstellar spaceship to escape the earth's destruction from environmental disasters, geopolitical unrest, terrorism, and nuclear war. The Flight of the Mayflower tells of a future world self-destructing. If you stay with the dying world, you too will suffer destruction. Your only hope is the ship that can save you and deliver you to a new world you cannot as yet see. That is the Mayflower.

Our mission from 1620 to 2020 and beyond remains the same, does it not? To take on new passengers. To make them Pilgrims. To help them on their Pilgrim journey of faith. To deliver them safely to God's New World. Our cargo is precious. Will we be faithful? What new ways will we discover, create and try, to attract new Pilgrims, a post-modern generation, and help them on their unique faith journey? Most churches don't have a three year plan, much less a plan for next year. If we ask the Lord for guidance, it will be given, then a course can be set, then the Lord will provide the courage to leave safe harbor.

Are we like the Mayflower warship, chasing down evil in this world, championing the causes of Christ, contenting for the truth? I hope so. Or are we only going around looking for trouble? Let's choose carefully what battles to fight, not engaging in every conflict and issue that we come upon. Remember: We've got Pilgrims to deliver!

Are we bravely pioneering like those who sailed in the Mayflower of 1620, making new pathways for others to follow?

Are we like the second Mayflower, working hard to fulfill our calling, our mission, faithfully following in the pathways of the saints who have made this journey before us and shown us the way?

Are we like Mayflower II sitting in Plymouth Harbor? Inspiring, informative, it serves its mission well. Does God, through what we do, inspire and inform people? But then, is our mission as a church to be a museum? Or to be under motion for God, taking on passengers, making them into Pilgrims and delivering them into God's care? I enjoyed being on the Mayflower II several years ago. I enjoy most of all tall ships under full sail on the high seas. They are the most attractive because they are doing exactly what they were designed to do by their maker.

Are we more like the Mayflower Transit, the hot air balloon, trying to fly above it all and be removed from the problems of this world, yet totally dependent upon the Spirit to guide us to our final destination?

Or are we putting together the Mayflower starship of tomorrow? Are we replacing sails with ion engines, covering our hull with heat resistant tile? Are we refitting our Mayflower for a new church age? Are we addressing the needs of those who, today and in the years to come, long to be passengers and be delivered from a dying world?

Which Mayflower are we on? Which Mayflower do we want to be on? Remember: the guiding biblical principle of Christian Congregationalism is taken from Matthew 18:18-20. Jesus promises that where two or three are gathered in his name, he will be among them. Some of our Congregational churches are very small in membership. Yet I don't know any that are fewer than two members. As long as each church gathers "in the name of Jesus" this promise applies. Not only does Jesus promise to be present, but he tells us what we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, what we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. This is not saying we are able to manipulate God by doing something on earth. Heavens no! It is saying that under God's direction, our congregation, and congregations across our country and around the world, are granted by the Almighty more power to change the world than we realize or can even fathom. I believe we only use a small fraction of the power available to us.

Many of our Congregational churches across the country believe they are too small to do much of anything. A bunch of middle sized and even larger congregations think the same thing. If we think that we are all very mistaken. If it was just us as a gathering of humans trying on their own, we would fail. The promise comes to us as it did to Pilgrims long ago: Where there are two or three of us, gathered in His name, we can trust the Lord to be present to direct us, to enable us, to gift us with whatever it is we need to fulfill our journey, to complete our mission, to deliver a boat load of Pilgrims on a journey of faith, no matter what Mayflower we may be on right now. With the wind of the Spirit filling our sails, let us pray, plan, believe, give, and work so that our God-given mission may be complete. Godspeed.