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THANK GOD FOR DISSENT

Someone actually came up to me the other day and said, “Robin is Thanksgiving on Thursday this year?” Yes, I replied, you can count on it. And so too can you count on the scene that will play out in countless American homes this Thursday: the turkey, the dressing, and the pumpkin pie of course, but most of all – the gathering of family members who don’t see each other much in a ritual that is both poignant and sometimes stressful. Holidays are wonderful because they put us in close proximity with people we are related to. Holidays are dangerous for exactly the same reason.

So my best to you and yours as you travel, or as you welcome those who are headed your way, and my hope is that you will find this time to be good for your soul. It is always worth remembering that gratitude is the essential religious disposition, and a shared meal is the basic human sacrament — so don’t forget to look each other in the eye as you pass the sweet potatoes. And in these difficult times, be deeply grateful for your blessings.

I am grateful this year for a ten year old boy in Arkansas named Will Phillips, who has decided that he will not stand in his classroom and recite the pledge of allegiance with the other students because it ends with the well-known phrase, “with liberty and justice for all.” Will has given some thought to this, and decided that if he stands and repeats the oath he will be participating in a fundamental misstatement of fact — since not everyone has liberty and justice — in particular gays and lesbians who cannot marry.

So in silent protest he sits, and then endures the harassment of both teachers and students. A substitute teacher demanded that he stand and recite

the pledge. He respectfully refused. The next day the teacher brought up his mother and grandmother, whom she said would want him to stand for the pledge. He politely refused. She got angry and raised her voice, and that's when Will said, "With all due respect, ma'am, you can go jump off a bridge."

Will was sent to the principal's office and given an assignment to look up information about the flag and what it represents. Meanwhile the principle called his mother, who told her that her son had just told a substitute teacher to jump off a bridge. It was only after a long discussion that it was revealed that the whole thing started because he had refused to stand for the pledge, which is his legal right. He knows this because he is a very, very smart kid – having skipped the fourth grade, he plans on being a lawyer, and according to his parents, prefers to have conversations about Teddy Roosevelt and terraforming Mars (whatever that means) to SpongeBob Square Pants or Radio Disney.

Will's father was baffled by his son's protest at first, and worried about what would happen to him — but after hearing Will's carefully reasoned explanation, he has decided to support him. When asked about what teachers and students were saying, you can guess the first response. They accused him of being gay — as if that would make any difference to the principle he was standing up, or rather sitting down, for.

Kids in the lunchroom come up and call me a "gaywad" he said. And yet, Will still refuses to stand for the pledge. When asked what being an American means, he said without hesitating, "Freedom of speech," and "the freedom to disagree." Somewhere, Thomas Jefferson is smiling.

This morning, on this High Holy Day for the Congregational tradition, I want to dedicate my sermon to all those who have dared to speak freely in dissent over the denial of basic human rights to all of God's children. Thank God for dissent.

Dissent is American, as American as baseball and apple pie. But what is happening in our country is that dissent of certain kinds is labeled as patriotic, while other forms of dissent are labeled as unpatriotic. In fact, in the USA Patriot Act, passed unanimously by Congress just a few weeks after the horror of 9/11 when absolutely no elected official dared to vote against it, there are stipulated penalties for criticism of the government. So those who opposed the war in Iraq for example, were called traitors. And the Bush administration created "free speech zones" far from the event itself, where signs and slogans could only be seen by the encircling cordon of police. Even though the world-wide protests just before the Iraq war began were the largest mass

demonstrations in human history, the corporate media barely covered the story. It was “America: Love it or Leave it” all over again.

This year, for Thanksgiving, I want to make certain that we understand that not only did our Pilgrim mothers and fathers share a first meal with those first inhabitants of this land, who helped our ancestors to survive the first winter, but we later drove them off the land in an act of ethnic cleansing, justified by Manifest Destiny, which is always how we justify our greatest crimes against humanity — to say that it is God’s will. The voices who have reminded us of this travesty are not unpatriotic. They are the guardians of history written not just by the winners, but by those the winners conquered.

Since we are descendents of the Congregational Way, let me remind you that the English Colonies were founded on dissent. Almost immediately after religious dissenters arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colonies, voices of protest rose up against the Puritan authorities. Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were banished for their views during the first decade of settlements. We came to these shores to practice religion freely, and everyone else was free to practice it also —as long as they practiced it freely in the right way.

And let us not forget that without dissent, there would be no America, since we waged a war to separate ourselves from a government that was not responsive to the needs of its colonial subjects, and so we penned the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in the midst of great debate, dissent, protest, argument, and resistance. None of it was easy, because nothing of great and lasting value ever is.

When it became clear to people of good conscience that slavery was a moral outrage, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison once was rescued from being lynched by a pro-slavery mob when the mayor of Boston had him thrown in jail. While incarcerated, Garrison wrote on the wall of his cell, “Wm. Lloyd Garrison was put into this cell Wednesday afternoon, October 21, 1835, to save him from the violence of a ‘respectable and influential’ mob, who sought to destroy him for preaching the abominable and dangerous doctrine that ‘all men are created equal.’”

Nineteen years later, on the fourth of July, 1854, Garrison burned a copy of the US. Constitution, proclaiming that because it acquiesced in the institution of slavery it was “an agreement with death and a covenant with hell.” Too bad FOX news wasn’t around in those days to lapel him the anti-Christ—and call for an amendment banning the burning of the Constitution.

In 1846, when Mexican forces had fired on American troops that had been sent across the disputed Mexican border to provoke just such an incident, President Polk asked Congress for a declaration of war. "American blood," he proclaimed, "had been shed on American soil." And so it was believed by all, until a freshman congressman from Illinois sarcastically criticized the President's policy by introducing the so-called "Spot Resolution" which would have required Polk to travel to Mexico to point out the exact spot on "American soil" where this had taken place. He couldn't of course, and the resolution was defeated. Polk then seriously questioned the patriotism of his young critic, Congressman Abraham Lincoln.

Henry David Thoreau, also protesting the war with Mexico, refused to pay a poll tax which he believed would be used to support the institution of slavery into new territory. He was arrested and jailed and wrote his famous essay, "On Resistance to Civil Government," in which he argued that if a law is unjust it is our duty to break the law. When his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson came to visit him in jail he quipped, "Henry, what are you doing in there?" To which Thoreau replied, "Ralph, what are you doing out there?"

Theodore Roosevelt, never a man to shun a military solution to a crisis, even said that criticism of a president during a time of war is not only not unpatriotic, but to force compliance from the American public would be a form of moral treason. He knew, as did so many others, that as the writer Randolph Bourne put it, "The State is a jealous God and will brook no rivals. Its sovereignty must pervade every one, and all feeling must be run into the stereotyped forms of romantic patriotic militarism which is the traditional expression of [what he called] the State herd-feeling. . . The nation boils with a slow insistent fever. A white terrorism is carried on by the Government against pacifist, socialists, enemy aliens, and a milder unofficial persecution against all persons or movements that can be imagined as connected with the enemy."

As a child of the 60's I was raised on dissent. I know that not all forms of dissent are equally noble, and some threw rocks in those days as much to hear the sound of breaking glass as to liberate anyone. But I have seen every significant moment of social progress fueled by those willing to go against the grain and be labeled a heretic, even a traitor.

I have also seen the rise of propaganda journalism, where channels like FOX News, which is the default channel in every bar and restaurant in this city, pump fear and hatred into people 24 hours a day with one single objective — to destroy a popular democratic president who dares to take on the wealthy and the powerful.

I support the right of anyone to criticize the president, of course, or I would be a hypocrite in preaching this sermon, but I have learned in my lifetime that some forms of dissent are manufactured, like this summer's town hall meetings, to hide the real agenda, which is to protect the fortunes of the status quo. I also know that last night's historic procedural vote, in which not a single Republican voted to support health care reform, is grounded in more than a consensus that the present system is hopelessly broken and unsustainable.

It is the nature of politics not to want to give your opponent a significant and historic victory, lest he be remembered as someone who steered the ship of state in a new and better direction and his party enjoy, as did the Democrats after FDR, the support of the majority of voters for a generation.

If I told you that critics of health care reform call it a "cruel hoax and a delusion" and that ads were taken out in 100 newspapers warning that reform would mean "the beginning of socialized medicine," and that the Wall Street Journal's editorial page would predict "deteriorating service," with government bureaucrats invading "the privacy of the examination room" where rationed care will reign and patients will lose the freedom to "choose their own doctor," you would surely assume that I was talking about the present.

But these quotes are actually from the early 1960's, during the battle over the passage of Medicare, which has become so popular that seniors demanded that in the cause of resisting government run health care, the government not touch their government-run health care.

In case you have forgotten how history repeats itself, when FDR was on his way to instituting Social Security, now called the "third rail of American politics" (because like the electrified third rail on the subway, if you touch it you die), Republicans denounced it as a Socialist program that would add to the tax burden and kill jobs. One representative from New York said that American would come to feel "the lash of the dictator," while another said Social Security would "end the progress of a great country." Another sounded like Glenn Beck when he thundered, "Never in the history of the world has any measure been brought here so insidiously designed as to prevent business recovery, to enslave workers."

Meanwhile, both programs became part of the proud fabric of American life. Life expectancy for people over 65 has risen significantly and America is no longer shamed by elderly Americans who cannot go to see a doctor when they are sick, or who starve because they have nothing when they retire.

Here is what I have learned about dissent as I have grown older. There is a critical difference between anger and fear over the possible loss of one's own advantage, and righteous indignation over the unjust plight of others. Anger burns us up and makes us look foolish because it is essentially selfish in nature. We are angry over some real or imagined injustice done to us. But the righteous indignation I am thankful for today is always felt on behalf of someone else who is being treated unfairly or whose dignity is being denied. Those who struggle against long odds over the savage inequities in our public education system come to mind. Those who volunteer to serve on school boards, which may be the world's most thankless job, are trying to change the shape of someone else's tomorrow.

Lots of people seem angry these days, but not over things that really matter. What we need are not more angry people, but more people who are indignant over the way we fail one another. The word comes from the Latin *indigitas* — from which the noun form, *indignity* comes — and it means the opposite of dignity. Most people get angry over real or perceived personal injuries, but we owe a special debt of gratitude to those who get indignant in response to a fundamental injustice that denies dignity to others.

In a world of super-heated rhetoric and over blown and self-serving predictions of the “end of America” as we know it, just apply the anger vs. indignity test. Is someone angry on behalf of him or herself, because they are better served by the status quo? Or are they indignant over the plight of others, and are passionate about taking personal risks to change a situation or a system that is unjust?

In church we are used to hearing the simple assertion that God is love, but love is not neutral in the face of things which can destroy that which we love. I have never believed in an angry God, but the prophets have long suggested that if God is love and love requires justice, then perhaps in the face of injustice God is indignant, and thus compels our dissent.

Conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War were not all cowards or communists — some just knew sooner than others that that war was both immoral and hopeless. Had more of us been more indignant sooner, 58,000 of my generation would not have had to die for nothing. Those who insisted that we face the AIDS epidemic instead of sweeping it under the rug were not homosexual apologists, but human beings who wanted to save the lives of other human beings.

Now President Obama faces the test of his presidency in deciding what to do about Afghanistan. I count myself among those who do not believe that not

only is there not a military solution there, but that no occupier ever survives in Afghanistan, and we won't either. If the president sends more troops, I will dissent even though I am both a supporter and an admirer of this president. My principles go deeper than partisan politics.

And my commitment to the gospel goes deeper than the political posturing of our time. The scandal of our time is not that church people don't believe enough of the right things, but that they think believing something is the same thing as doing something. Or that being angry and fearful is what faith is all about. They circle the wagons and assume that Jesus is on their side.

Every Sunday when we sing Micah's question, "What does the Lord require of [us] but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God" we are confessing that faith is a verb, not a noun. Doing justice is inseparable from hating injustice, loving kindness cannot be separated from despising cruelty, and walking humbly with God still requires us to stand up and walk!

My dear Pilgrims, may the blessings of Thanksgiving be with you this week, and please know how deeply grateful I am that so many of you in this congregation have made life better for someone else because you care, and yes because sometimes you are indignant. If we dissent from the church on behalf of the poor, and if we dissent from the government on behalf of equality and dignity denied to others, we are neither heretics nor traitors. We are disciples and patriots.

Amen.

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