

In the Spotlight: Pilgrims created a model society for us today

By John F. Gilligan

Posted Nov 25, 2010 at 12:01 AM

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America was where they could live their lives the way they believed God wanted. Of course, their Plymouth Plantation of 1620 was not the first English colony established in America. There was Jamestown in 1607. But that venture failed miserably, which is why the Pilgrims get the spotlight on Thanksgiving Day.

So here's the question: How is it that one failed and the other became legendary? Is there a lesson here?

Historians have pointed out that while the Pilgrims went for religion the others went for profit. But the difference was much deeper. It was cultural. One had a sense of community identity, the other didn't.

Those stepping off the Mayflower onto Plymouth Rock had a vision. And as the Book of Proverbs states: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." They went as families, the cornerstone of community, with a commitment among them to work collaboratively and cooperatively in fulfilling that vision. They placed their trust in God and in one another.

The Jamestown colony had a different mix. Most were young men seeking wealth and ease. They came as a group of individuals. Since they were accustomed to servants, they considered it beneath their dignity to get their hands dirty in the soil. In the end, their worldview and mindset became their ruination.

Both colonies had their tragedies. Almost half of their populations died from disease, climate and malnutrition. But self-seeking and non-cooperation in Jamestown led to strife, divisiveness, violence and murder among themselves and with the local Native Americans.

Dependency and expectations added to their undoing. They expected and waited for services, supplies and assistance from London. By the time they came, those who survived were nothing more than living skeletons.

The Pilgrims had similar material hardships. But they possessed what the other colony lacked: the non-material assets of self-reliance, hard work, mutual cooperation, personal responsibility and service to the greater good of the community. And they initially viewed and treated Native Americans as their neighbors, with whom they shared America's first Thanksgiving.

Given the troubles of our day and the political and social toxic culture in which we live, the Pilgrims show us a path to survival and prosperity. And for this they deserve our thanksgiving. It remains for us to follow that path.

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