

What?
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Psalm 19, Luke 6: 27-38
July 2, 2017

Ever since I knew that I had a preaching job for this Sunday, two days before the Fourth of July, I knew what I'd be talking about. This is different than most of my sermons where I follow Garrison Keillor's injunction to start talking and to keep talking until you think of something to say – good enough advice, but not for this Sunday. This Sunday I feel like a person on a mission.

The mission is to talk about another of Lincoln's speeches, the one that has haunted me ever since the first time I read it, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. It's not unusual for a preacher to refer to a speech by Lincoln in a sermon close to the 4th, but that speech is invariably The Gettysburg Address, delivered on July 4, 1863. Indeed it's a great speech, arguably American's finest example of political oratory. Stand up in the pulpit, read the Gettysburg Address, don't distract people over much with your own ruminations, and presto you have a good enough sermon.

But my mission this morning is to talk about his Second Inaugural Address, a speech he delivered on March 4, 1865. I first read his Second Inaugural a few years ago. I never ran across it in high school when we studied American history. This omission has a lot to do with where I grew up, Richmond, Virginia, capital of the Confederacy. For us American history was pretty much synonymous with Virginia history with a couple of footnotes about Plymouth Rock and the Boston Tea Party. I didn't learn Lincoln's speeches in high school, but I did learn the opening of Robert E. Lee's farewell address to the Army of Northern Virginia, when because of overwhelming odds, he was compelled to surrender his gallant little army to the conquering northern hordes. You get the idea.

I first read the Second Inaugural in a book by the biblical scholar Robert Alter called American Prose and the King James Bible. Alter shows how Lincoln's speech echoes the Bible in theme and language. The particular words and phrases Lincoln uses, as well as the speech's cadence and tone, are thoroughly biblical. He shows that the speech includes several biblical quotations, including our two scripture lessons for today. This is all true and all of it is interesting, But what compels me to talk about the speech this morning is something more. I believe that it has a message for us about how we are called to live out our faith, a message we would do well to attend to carefully.

Let's imagine ourselves standing in the crowd on Pennsylvania Avenue that first Saturday in March, 1865, packed in to hear the president. It had been raining on and off for weeks, so we'd be standing in a sea of mud. Still the mood is upbeat, Lincoln had been reelected and the news from the battlefield was all good. The terrible war was almost over.

Now is the time to celebrate. Also, depending on your spot in the crowd, you might see a dramatically handsome young man standing nearby, maybe you'd even recognize him, the up and coming actor John Wilkes Booth. In a little more than month, he would assassinate the president.

Leaning forward, you'd hear Lincoln's high-pitched voice. Reflecting on the war, faith, and the Bible – he spoke about the north and the south, “Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.” He continued, “The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.”

Extraordinary words, they are even more extraordinary given the context. Lincoln had just won a tough fight for re-election. As far as he knew, he had won his four more years. Even more, his side was on the verge of winning the Civil War. Lee's surrender and farewell address were only a few weeks away. Given the context, given the expectations of the crowd – we'd expect some triumph, some shouting of “We're number one!” some gloating and settling of scores. We've gotten so used to win/lose, us/them politics that it's hard to imagine the winner behaving otherwise.

But Lincoln does. Instead of telling us about all he's accomplished, he gives us a meditation on the Christian faith in a divided nation. It's strikingly even handed until he comes to slavery itself. Then he asks how anyone can think that it is God's will that they seize the fruit of someone else's labor, the bread someone else sweated to earn. How can a Christian justify slavery? How could the south take up arms on its behalf?

At this point in the speech, it certainly seems that Lincoln had set the stage to condemn the south. In its defense of slavery the south has defied the very will of God, and tried to justify the unjustifiable by twisting scripture to suit its own purposes. They deserved a smack down. But instead of condemning the south, Lincoln quotes from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, “Let us judge not that we be not judged.”

What? This is the part of the Second Inaugural address that always brings me up short. It's hard to think of a scripture less likely to be quoted in a political speech, then or now. Even more, Alter argues that many in the biblically literate crowd would remember what comes right before this in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus commands his listeners to love your enemies, do good to them, lend to them and expect nothing in return. What an unfashionable idea, again both then and now.

What was Lincoln thinking? Why had he written a speech that seemed to veer so sharply from what the crowd gathered before him had been expecting to hear? Well, I've been thinking about this on and off for months, and I can't help but believe that Lincoln was thinking about his faith, that he was being true to his unconventional, inexorably honest understanding of God's will and God's purpose. Unlike so many in his day and ours, he is unwilling to claim that he knows what God's purposes are. As he says, "the almighty has his own purposes."

Yes, Lincoln does seek to align his actions with the purposes of God. He wants to do God's will as it is known to him. But God's will is not known to him, at least not fully. He knows he's Abraham Lincoln, not Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, or any of the prophets. Their knowledge is not his. In his faith, he is too humble and honest to claim more than he knows to be true or more than he knows himself to be. I believe that here we touch something very deep and personal about Lincoln, his inner struggle with faith, his unwillingness to claim to know what he can't, his attempt to live by faith even as he is honest about doubt.

As we move towards the end of the speech, Lincoln's personal faith again breaks through. He says, "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war will speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

Again, we hear Lincoln's thoughtful, pensive tone. Could the war be some kind of horrific expiation for slavery? Are we paying the price for our sins and for the sins of past generations who profited from slavery? He doesn't know, doesn't claim to know. But he does know that "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

These last words are a quote from the 19th Psalm, one of the triumphs of the Psalter. Connecting God's creation to God's law, the psalm begins, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge." One can imagine Lincoln meditating on these majestic words. Humble before the message of the psalm, he does not pretend to know the speech or the knowledge of heaven. He cannot be sure if his actions or the actions of the nation he leads are in conformity with the true and righteous law of God.

Yet, though he was unsure if his actions were aligned with God's law, he still had to act. And for over four years he did act, boldly and decisively. He led the nation through a terrible war. He brought an end to slavery. So doing, he showed how one can reconcile deep humility before scripture and the faith with vigorous action. At the conclusion of the

speech he says, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Again we hear the language, theme, and cadence of the Bible. We hear in a few words – “with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right” – how Lincoln reconciled his honest and humble faith with the need to act for justice in the world. We do our best to see the right as God gives it for us to see. We admit that we cannot see it perfectly or know it all, but on the basis of the right that we do see and know, we act and we act decisively to “finish the work we are in”.

To see the right in our days, as it was in the days of Lincoln, means that we look toward the scripture. We do well to consider the two scriptures from today, the one Lincoln turned to as he sought the right. I believe we do well to look at all those scriptures, which have guided Christians in the past when action is needed and the way ahead is not clear. For us in the United Church of Christ it means we look to the words of prophets and apostles who call us to do justice and make peace, to stand beside the vulnerable in our own day as Lincoln did in his. It means to show courage in the struggle for justice and peace, in other words to show firmness in the right.

So the Fourth of July will be here in a couple of days. If you’re like me you’ll find a place where there’s good fireworks, and even better if it’s a place where you get to hear a lot of John Philip Sousa before the first loud explosion of fireworks sets off the chorus of oohs and ahs, not to mention setting off much barking of dogs and the occasional car alarm. But we’re not quite there yet. It’s till Sunday, the second, time to consider our faith and what it’s calling us to do. I know no better example of how one does this then the speech I have shared with us today.