

***WITH CHARITY FOR ALL***  
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University Congregational Church  
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Reading from Abraham Lincoln's *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865

**The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that many by whom the offense cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of the offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man'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."**

As we celebrate the Fourth of July and American freedom, I am reminded that this year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War. Through June of 1861 there were eight skirmishes with the first major battle of Bull Run fought on July 21. There were 847 Confederate and Union soldiers killed on that day. While the Union lost that battle both sides of the Civil War realized that it would be a long and protracted war with greater casualties than anyone could possibly imagine.

Total casualties of the Civil War, in terms of deaths, were close to 625,000. That is nearly 200,000 more military personnel killed in World War II and still exceeds all deaths in both World Wars combined. This does not include those who returned home as amputees, scarred, and emotionally traumatized from four years of battle. It does not include civilians and the ruin of homes, farms, cities, and factories.

The Civil War was still a major topic of conversation around my childhood family table, especially that of my grandfather, Herbert Pickett. Yes, we are related to *that* Pickett who led the charge at Gettysburg. In our home Robert E. Lee was considered a man of honor and worthy of our respect. The Stars and Bars were common flags flown in my home state of Florida. The red diagonal bars of the Confederate flag remain on the state flag of Florida today. Yankees were damned and the worst thing you could call a damned Yankee was “carpetbagger”. These were thought to be exploitive opportunists who have leached off the South since 1865.

But the scars of the Civil War are deeper than family history. The question of slavery still lingers as we struggle with the civil rights of gay, lesbian, transgender, and transsexual persons. Human sex trafficking is a global phenomenon and is found right here in Wichita, KS. One of the great debates in our nation today is the question of civil rights for immigrants. People of color still feel the lash of prejudice and must constantly protect the strides they have made since President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.”

In addition to slavery the other major issue of the Civil War was states rights, specifically the right of a state to secede from the Union. That issue is alive and well in these United States, 2011. Who has the right to determine and enforce immigration policy, the federal government or the states? How far can the federal government go requiring unfunded mandates to states on all kinds of issues from education to health care? Who determines the civil rights of gays and lesbians on the right to marriage, survivor benefits, and power of attorney – the states or the federal government? In his

press conference this week, President Obama stated that New York's decision to allow civil marriage for gays and lesbians was properly a states rights issue. The same is true with the right to abortion. In some states the protected right to abortion as established in *Roe vs. Wade* is undermined by governments that seek to deny funding; establish restrictive rules of access to minors; or demand "counseling" and waiting periods before the right can be accessed. The current challenges to President Obama's health care legislation is being led in part by various states attorneys general in federal courthouses across the country. The Civil War did not settle the question of states rights. Nor should it have.

When Lincoln wrote his Second Inaugural he realized that the nation had paid a huge price where some gains had been made on the issue of slavery and states rights, but certainly not resolved. He had seen the battlefields and walked the hospital corridors in Washington, D.C. He saw the graves and passed the continuous line of horse drawn ambulances and hearses making their way into the capital's hospitals. Walt Whitman wrote of the 30 to 40 large military hospitals that dotted the landscape of Washington, D.C., holding 50,000 – 70,000 wounded. Whitman wrote:

Indeed, we can hardly look in any direction but these clusters (of hospitals) are dotting the landscape and environs. That little town, as you might suppose it, on the brow of a hill, is indeed a town, but of wounds, sickness and death.<sup>1</sup>

Lincoln was quite familiar with the sorrow that inundated the capital. He wrote letters to grieving families. Knowing the limits of language he closed such a letter to Ephraim D. and Phoebe E. Ellsworth with, "May God give you that consolation which

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), p. 47.

is beyond all earthly power.” Their son, Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth, was killed May 24, 1861.<sup>2</sup>

Rain and hail had fallen on Washington, D.C. throughout the morning of the Second Inaugural, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1865. But just a few hours before the event the sun broke out. Lincoln’s speech is the second shortest of all inaugural addresses in American history. (The shortest inaugural was given by George Washington.) It was written on two pages and contains only 703 words. And like his Gettysburg Address, the Second Inaugural Address represents some of the finest prose in American literature. On April 9, 1865 Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, President Lincoln was assassinated.

One notices immediately that this speech is not a victory proclamation by the president. Though the end of the war was imminent Lincoln did not strike a pose of vindication or punishment. Rather, it is a speech of reconciliation and peace. Some, like Daniel Webster, described the inaugural as a sermon. While many previous presidents referenced God or the deity, Abraham Lincoln referenced the Bible multiple times. Only one Biblical reference can be found in all previous inaugural addresses.<sup>3</sup> Lincoln’s most startling quote is from Matthew 18:7, “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” There are also other references in Matthew, Revelation, and Genesis.

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Letter to Ephraim D. and Phoebe Ellsworth,” May 25, 1861, at [www.showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/ellsworth.html](http://www.showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/ellsworth.html). Down loaded June 30, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See “Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address,” *Gale Encyclopedia of US History* at <http://www.answers.com/topic/lincoln-s-second-inaugural-address.html>. Downloaded June 30, 2011.

The overall theme of Lincoln's Second Inaugural is that the nation is under the judgment of God. It is God's judgment that the whole nation pays the penalty for slavery in both North and South. The offences of the nation would surely include those who built the slave ships, those who ran slaves, those who sold them, and those who bought them. The only possible response of the nation is reconciliation. He declared:

**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 of which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.**

A nation that is sorely wounded, deeply divided, and profoundly aggrieved can only have a future when anger and hatred are released from our hearts; love and sustenance shared with all, and just and right relationships are reaffirmed. We must care for the wounded and vulnerable in our community. Each and every one is called to embrace the other with peace and the well-being of others in our hearts and with our hands.

Lincoln's theology seems to suggest that the judgment and punishment of God, visited upon the entire nation, requires only one response, reconciling love and compassion for one another. In the words of St. Clement of Alexandria, "For the sake of each of us he laid down his life--worth no less than the universe. He demands of us in return our lives for the sake of each other."

In his book, *Uncommon Friends*, James Newton tells the story of Thomas A. Edison spending nearly 24 hours with his research team creating the first light bulb. When the first bulb was finished Edison gave it to a young boy to carry upstairs while

he worked on the second one. Very cautiously the boy carried the light bulb up the stairs to the next floor. You have already guessed what happened. The kid dropped the bulb at the top of the stairs. It took Edison another 24 hours to build the second bulb. Very tired, Edison gave the second light bulb to the very same boy who had broken the first one.<sup>4</sup> That is faith. That is reconciliation! Imagine the reconciliation needed in a nation with 625,000 dead – dead sons, dead brothers and dead fathers, each having killed the other.

I have framed Mr. Lincoln's speech in Christocentric terms. I believe they are values thoroughly consistent with the gospel. But I have no idea if Abraham Lincoln was a Christian. Gerald Prokopowicz wrote a fascinating little book, *Did Abraham Lincoln Own Slaves?* Prokopowicz reminds us that we have no record that Lincoln was ever a convert to Christianity or baptized as a Christian. He attended Presbyterian Churches as an adult but was never a member of any church. Though he was quite familiar with the Bible, his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, stated that he was not a Christian.<sup>5</sup> And yet, was there a president more deeply spiritual than Abraham Lincoln? The latter speeches and letters of his life evince a depth of soul and wisdom that few could measure against. His words fit neatly into the Sermon on the Mount.

I think that Lincoln placed himself under the same judgment he believed God had leveled against the nation. With so many dead, how could he not feel the losses of Union and Southern troops? They were all the sons of this nation, for Lincoln refused

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<sup>4</sup> James Newton, *Uncommon Friends*, as quoted in "Sermon Illustrations," <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/forgiveness.html>. Downloaded July 1, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Prokopowicz, *Did Abraham Lincoln Own Slaves* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), see pages 31-33.

to believe that the Union could ever be dissolved. He felt every death and wound as his own and knew desperately the need for healing. He took God's judgment personally.

Religious labels, denominational identifiers, and theological tags do not absolve us from the truth about ourselves as broken human beings in need of God's grace. We can claim to be one nation under God. And indeed we are one nation called to the just and fair treatment of every human being. One nation ordained to preserve the civil rights of every man, woman, and child; One nation whose future rests in the hands of forgiveness, charity, and compassion.

On April 16, 1865, Whitman wrote of President's Lincoln's assassination:

By many has this Union been help'd; but if one name, one man, must be pick'd out, he, most of all, is the conservator of it, to the future. He was assassinated – but the Union was not assassinated. One falls and another falls. The soldier drops, sinks like a wave – but the ranks of the ocean eternally press on. Death does its work, obliterates a hundred, a thousand – President, general, captain, private – but the Nation is immortal.<sup>6</sup>

On the 235<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American independence we have much to be thankful for. We have many more to care for. This nation is divided along racial, economic, gender, gender orientation, and religious identities. Unemployment and underemployment are incapable of sustaining American families. Civil rights are in constant jeopardy. War is unabated though on foreign soil, and we have a great debt to our veterans – their widows and orphaned children. 150 years after the Civil War we are in much need to be free from all malice. Lincoln would call us today to charity for all and firmness in the right. Such qualities are as essential to our freedom as

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<sup>6</sup>Whitman, pp. 68-69.

health care reform, debt relief, and just about any other political solution you can name. Charity for all is something that the president cannot mandate nor congress legislate. Freedom rests within the goodwill of our own hearts. Perhaps if we the people could embrace Mr. Lincoln's values the government would follow.

*Finis*