

Abraham Lincoln's Sermon On the Mount

Matthew 7:1-5

Guest preacher - Dr. Ronald White

Sunday, July 2, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

In enjoying the privilege of speaking about Abraham Lincoln over the years, one question seems to come again and again—at the end of a National Public Radio talk show, after a lecture, after a sermon. The question is usually prefaced by someone saying something like this: You'll have to admit, Dr. White, that Abraham Lincoln spoke in the 19th century to a nation that was basically Christian or Judeo-Christian, but today we live in a nation that is mostly multi-cultural or multi-religious and then the question. It's always phrased something like this: do you think it is still possible in the 21st century to speak about God in the public places when we celebrate our country, the meaning of our faith.

This is a question ... how do you answer it? How do I answer it, when we speak about God in the public places of our lives?

I suggest that Abraham Lincoln can be our guide, and that after 140 years, his words are strangely and wonderfully timeless as we attempt to answer that question. I've inserted into your bulletin this morning the text of Lincoln's second inaugural address. I'd like you to take it in your hand almost as if you'd had a scripture text. This is an American text, and we are going to do our best to discover it's meaning together.

Lincoln's address was delivered on March 4, 1865, before a crowd of 35,000 to 40,000 people. They had come through terrible wind and rain that day, something like this last week, to hear the President after this tumultuous war. 620,000 dead. That's as many as our previous wars combined. But if you remember that this was a tiny nation of but 30 million people, and even compare it to World War II, that greatest generation now passing away, when the nation was 130-140 million, it would really be like 2.5 million people died during the Civil War.

So as I read the letters and diaries of those coming to the inauguration, I expected to find, many of you have been to inaugurations I'm sure, a mood of celebration, jubilation and expectation, but I found something else. In these letters, I found a mood of anger. Anger that these persons present, almost every one of whom had lost a husband, brother, son, deeply angry at the other side, the enemy, who had caused these deaths and they would have cheered had Abraham Lincoln given voice to that anger in this second inaugural address. Oh, people were just settling in as he was concluding, as it was only 6-7 minutes long. 701 words. George Washington offered the briefest second inaugural address. You recall he did not want to run for a second term and there was no tradition. I'd like to think that George Washington stood up and said something like this: thank you very much. And sat down.

But Abraham Lincoln, in 701 words, mentions God 14 times, quotes scripture 4 times and invokes prayer three times. This second inaugural address that we will just barely begin to discuss this morning offers us, I believe, a guide for how you and I can answer the question: How do we speak about God in the public places of our lives?

The first clue is Lincoln's use of what I call "inclusive language." Rather than demonizing the South, he was already asking the question: how do we bring the South back into the Union? And he understood that if they alone were to bear the blame and the shame that they would never be brought back into the Union again. So notice at the beginning of second paragraph as you take the text into your hand, Lincoln says: on the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it. All sought to avert it. Lincoln is giving the best intentions to the supposed enemy, the South, towards the end of the paragraph. BOTH parties deprecated war. And in just a minute we will hear him say that both read the same Bible.

In our multi-religious and multi-cultural world, as you and I wish to give witness to our faith in Jesus

Christ, we need to begin with respectful listening. With giving our best intentions to others who are aspiring in their own way to discover some meaning of truth. To offer respect and to listen. This is Lincoln's posture and it sets the parameters for what he wishes to say. But the real question is: how will we give resources to our witness. How will we speak? It's so easy, it seems to me, in the tumultuous times that are becoming less civil in our political discourse and our political campaigns to sort of drop back to the various political ideas or ideologies that we hold instead of as Christians, beginning from the Biblical resources that can sustain what we believe and think.

I had been told when I started writing a book on the second inaugural address (I was told by academic scholars and friends), they said: well, don't get too excited about Lincoln's religious language. That's what all politicians use, Presidents and others, and you'll find that all other inaugural addresses have used that same sort of language and so I thought I'd see if that was true. And I did discover that all previous inaugural addresses had used some form for the name of God, supreme being/ deity, in their address. But always in the last paragraph. Sort of like: we need help God to....

What surprised me was that only once before was the Bible quoted in an inaugural address. And now Lincoln, not in the last paragraph, but in the central third paragraph, will quote the Bible four times — twice from the Old Testament, twice from the New Testament. (When we meet on Wednesday nights this fall, we are going to sort of explore that in greater depth.) And to the listening ear, you will be able to hear other intimations of biblical verses from this man who had committed so much of the Bible to memory.

So from what do we speak when we give witness to our faith? Are we deeply rooted in the Bible that this is part of our witness? As authorities in Gettysburg prepared for the dedication of a first national military cemetery, and had invited Edward Everett and, secondly, Abraham Lincoln to speak, they had a monumental task before them. They had 50,000 dead, wounded, or missing soldiers and they decided that they would take everything off the bodies of the soldiers- money, letters, diaries... anything that was theirs so it could be catalogued and families could come and collect it.

What they chiefly found were Bibles. And what you can find when you turn to the second page, when Lincoln gets to that first line and says: both read from the same Bible, and pray to the same God, he is signaling to us that he intends to think theologically as well as politically about the meaning of the Civil War.

His first words are words of affirmation. I think of Lincoln as a C.S. Lewis, as you can read the Chronicles of Narnia and children and grandchildren, 6-7 year olds can grasp its meaning, but you can also as an adult or young adult, go back and read the Chronicles again and see the deep, deep truths that are embedded there. I suggest that this afternoon, this evening or this week, you take this address and read it and see the meaning of Lincoln's words. For after affirming in inclusive language that both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, he then puts the sticker into it as each invokes the aid of the other. He had become very tired of the delegations of both politicians and ministers who came to him over and over again to say: God is on our side.

God is on our side. One day, he said: don't you think if God is on our side that the President of the United States would become part of the conversation? And then one day he said: I'm not as concerned about whether or not God is on our side. I want to know how I can get on God's side. Central in his use of the Bible is this passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: let us judge not so that we may not be judged. Remember the expectations of the audience ... they wanted Lincoln to judge the South. Lincoln quickly disabuses that by invoking Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You recall that Jesus' sermon is rooted in humility and passion. It is really blessed are those who do not follow the way of the world, the way of judgment and criticism.

Jesus' moral light comes through this Sermon on the Mount and this is the center of Lincoln's second inaugural address. A lot of critics and cynics have said: well, I wonder if this is just the shrewd language of a politician. I've enjoyed and tried to follow the trail of Abraham Lincoln. All of those people who were close to him gave multiple evidences of his use of the Bible. Rebecca Pomeroy was a nurse who was called into the White House after the death of Willie Lincoln. Mary Lincoln was in a very difficult state so she was there to care for her.

As they would gather for lunch everyday, Rebecca Pomeroy would notice that Abraham Lincoln would sit there in a rocking chair and take his shoes off, and she would quickly put his slippers on, and he would take out the old Bible and one day he said to her, "What is your favorite portion of the Bible?" And she said, "Psalms. And he said, "Me, too. I've memorized a good portion of it." So here is a person who's resources for offering public address come from the Bible.

But the third question we have to ask when giving witness to our faith is: what are we giving witness to? Is it from our own experience or are we pointing beyond ourselves to a God who acts in history. If you look back now on the first and second paragraphs of the second inaugural address, it's as if Lincoln is somehow standing above or outside of the conflict. He's like a chronicler. He's describing the events. He doesn't use his own name. He only uses two personal pronouns in the second inaugural address.

Lincoln uses not one personal pronoun in the Gettysburg address. But in that central paragraph, in the architectural center of the paragraph, there is a ringing affirmation: the Almighty has his own purposes. And now we see that Lincoln, who had been describing the actions of the soldiers, the generals, the commander in chief, is suggesting that the chief actor in the Civil War is God himself. Most of the Lincoln biographers have chosen to depict Lincoln as a fatalist. A person who, yes, never joined a church, and one who believed in a kind of deistic God, a God who was like a watchmaker, who had set the world in motion and then let it run down but did not intervene in history.

I rather suggest that the Lincoln who grew to maturity through the Civil War, who sat under the preaching of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, was growing in his understanding of what I call, a providential God — yes, a Presbyterian God, who understood that God is a God of personality. Who loves and acts in history. The Almighty has his own purposes. The greatest tragedy of the Civil War in a personal sense was not even the death of 620,000 men, but the death of Willie Lincoln. Willie was a boy of four who was most like this father. He died in February of 1862 and Lincoln invited Phineas Densmore Gurly to come and preach the funeral sermon. And while he was there, Gurly said to a grieving Abraham and Mary something that he called "very comforting," and these were his words. He encouraged them to get a clear and scriptural view of providence. The second inaugural address is one of clear and scriptural providence.

When we come to the last paragraph, the one in which we are most familiar, we hear Lincoln's words that echo down through the century: with malice toward none and charity for all. Forty one days after he delivered this address, he would be dead. The people in Washington, struggling to know how to honor their fallen President, put on mourning badges, silk mourning badges. Most of which bore this message: with malice toward none, with charity for all.

For they had looked back at the prison of his death and understood that Lincoln had lived his life with malice toward none, with charity for all. A reporter for the New York Herald noticed that there had only been four occasions of applause. How surprising for a state of the union/inaugural address. But the reporter, possibly with the eye of someone with a view from outside of this culture noticed there was a different response from this audience. It started from the very back of the crowd and went something like this: bless the Lord, bless the Lord, etc. It was the African-Americans in the crowd that day, most whom had never been to an inaugural address before. They understood what Lincoln was saying and they took up the response: bless the Lord, bless the Lord. Frederick Douglass, the greatest African-American of the 19th century later wrote in his diary that evening, this was not a state paper, this was a sermon.

And if it is a sermon for us, this sermon, let me suggest that in protestant sermons then and now, there are usually two parts if I may illustrate it this way. The first is what I call the indicative. This is where the minister announces what God has done. What God has done in bringing people through the Red Sea to the Promised Land. What God has done in the person, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we all know as sure as we sit here, that coming at the end of the sermon, Gareth or whoever is teaching is going to say: and this is what you need to do this week and in the coming days.

So may I suggest that in this Sermon on the Mount, that the first three paragraphs are Lincoln's indicative of what God has done in grace, judgment and reconciliation. You'll have to come this fall to get into the

real heart of the address when to the surprise of everyone, he thunders forth sort of like a Puritan Jeremiah: if we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come. In this moment of high expectation, Lincoln dared to say to those assembled: we have a great evil in our midst. Oh, the crowd would have cheered if he would have said "southern slavery" or maybe if he even had said "slavery" but he uses inclusive language "American slavery," we are all involved in this terrible evil.

But then Lincoln comes to his close. I'm going to suggest that you put an unvoiced "therefore" before that last paragraph. The indicative is like Paul's letters in the New Testament and then Ephesians 4, chapter 1: "Therefore, I, a prisoner of the Lord, lead you to a life of the calling to which you have been called." Abraham Lincoln: "Therefore, with malice toward none, with charity for all." I've thought for a long time how Lincoln may have come to those words, or whether he thought that a nation so deeply divided was actually able to come forward in acts of forgiveness, passion, and reconciliation.

We live in a divided nation today and part of the way we give witness to our faith is to listen to others speak from a Biblical standpoint and to point to a God that acts in history and then our words become our deeds as we live out the Christian calling with malice toward none and charity for all. These are the words that reach across 140 years and are so strangely and beautifully timeless for us after all of these years.

Abraham Lincoln always read out loud. Children used to always read out loud until someone in 1910 or 1920 got the idea: shhh, read to yourself. Abraham would read to Mary. Mary would read to Abraham. I suggest in reading about Lincoln, we say and read his words out loud. Listen for the word of God. Listen for Abraham Lincoln.

Let us close our 4th of July benediction today by saying out loud Lincoln's words, as the way we will go forth from this sanctuary with our imperative. Let's say these words together:

"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."

God, we thank you for this American text that echoes the cores of your Biblical providence in our midst. By your Holy Spirit, may you take the words that we have just said and that they will become what we will do. In the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, Amen.