

Sixth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): "The Sermon on the Mount and Mr. Lincoln"

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

February 11-12, '23

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

What are we celebrating this Sunday?? [Will folks say Superbowl? Probably ☺.] Ok, but the date of Superbowl changes from year to year. What is **always** celebrated on February 12 (at least in the US)? Mr. Lincoln's birthday!

Abe Lincoln (or as he always signed his name, A Lincoln) is my favorite historic American. His story is notable because his first home was a log cabin and his last was the White House: a journey with a lot of detours, many disappointments, a series of devastating losses. Let's see how much we collectively know about him. Go for it! What do you know about Abraham Lincoln's life?

- Illinois claims him as her native son, but he was born in Kentucky on February 12, 1809. There's a story that his 9-year-old cousin came to see the new baby, held him briefly, then passed him off to another relative, saying, "Aunt, take him! He'll never come to much." Carl Sandburg writes in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years*:
"Whatever the exact particulars, the definite event on that 12th of February, 1809, was the birth of a boy they named Abraham after his grandfather who had been killed by Indians born in silence and pain from a wilderness mother on a bed of perhaps cornhusks and perhaps hen feathers with perhaps a laughing child prophecy later that he would 'never come to much.'"¹
- Mr. Lincoln dearly loved his mother Nancy Hanks who died when he was 9 years old. What he wrote about his mother in later years often shows up on Mother's Day cards: "**All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother.**"
- He grew up poor, studied by firelight, borrowed books and consumed them for their knowledge, was largely self-educated, and worked a whole passel of jobs along the way, including logger, log-splitter, country store and mill manager, militia captain during the Black Hawk War, postmaster, surveyer, lawyer, state legislator, U.S. Congressman and President of the United States.
- He didn't fare all that well in love. Ann Rutledge was a woman he loved and may have been engaged to, we're not sure. He was devastated when she died. In time he married Mary Todd. They had 4 sons, only 1 of whom lived to adulthood, the eldest, Robert Todd. Edward died just shy of 4 years old, Willie died at 11; Lincoln grieved them deeply. Tad died after his father's assassination.

The Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863) is, of course, one of the best-remembered actions of Lincoln. Historians are quick to remind us that Lincoln had not **always** been opposed to **all** slavery, and that primarily he issued the Emancipation Proclamation to save the Union rather than free

the enslaved. I think he would have been quick to say at **any** point in his life, “God isn’t finished with me yet.” He was a humble man with a self-deprecating sense of humor, a believer in God and well-acquainted with Scripture, though certainly not a regular churchgoer and not drawn at all to institutional religion.

We’ve been hearing from the Sermon on the Mount these past few weeks in worship. Jesus paints a clear picture of God’s will for us, and I think Mr. Lincoln’s words and actions show that he had a profound desire to do God’s will. We are called to know ourselves, our shortcomings, our self-centeredness well enough to know our need of God, to comfort those who mourn, to hunger and thirst for peace and justice, to be merciful, to be peacemakers, to be the salt of the earth, to shed God’s light in this world. Today we are also told to dispense with destructive anger.

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. (NRSV)

The word translated into English as “hell of fire” is Gehenna, an actual place known to Jesus’ listeners, a hell on earth. It refers to the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, and it was so awful if became a metaphor for hell. It was the place where children had once been sacrificed to the god Moloch, an abomination adopted by Ahaz, Jezebel’s husband, then thankfully abandoned again. In Jesus’ time the Valley of Hinnom was a stinking, smoldering landfill, a smoke-cloaked garbage dump. Because of its history, it was considered cursed.

Our anger toward others or theirs toward us can make our life, our little world, a hell on earth. Apparently the kind of anger Jesus is referring to is the slowly building and long-lasting kind, not the fly-off-the-handle, then-calm-down-quickly variety.² This anger is deadly because it goes so deep and runs so long. That wouldn’t be the case if we didn’t feed it to keep it going. But we know what it’s like to relive a hurt, a slight, an insult, over and over, telling the tale, expressing our outrage, keeping the anger alive as if we were feeding kindling to a fire. Just when it might naturally start to die down, we throw on another log, or stir the embers with a poker, so that tongues of flame jump up again. Maybe we get some

perverse satisfaction in naming ourselves as the victim, but ultimately we're wasting precious energy and further injuring whatever relationship was ruptured, a relationship that must have been pretty important to us or we wouldn't have gotten so angry in the first place!

The healing of human relationships is so important to God that Jesus says, "Wait on worshipping my Father in heaven till you mend fences with your brother or sister." Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*:

23-24 "This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God. 25 Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him."

The American Civil War was a huge example of rupture in human relationships: not just between North and South or between individual states, but within families. Even now, 160 years later, emotions sometimes run high, especially among those who bemoan the outcome of the War of Northern Aggression. Imagine how strongly people felt while the armed conflict was still occurring! Yet this is what Mr. Lincoln, a war president who longed to see peace, said in his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865, 41 days before his assassination:

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained... 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. The prayers of both could not be answered ~ that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes... If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those 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 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.'

"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."

President Lincoln worked on reconciliation in very personal ways. After the bloody battle of Antietam in October of 1862, so costly to both sides, he visited the vicinity and specifically asked to see the Confederate wounded. A Baltimore newspaper reported:

Passing through one of the hospitals devoted exclusively to Confederate sick and wounded, President Lincoln's attention was drawn to a young Georgian – a fine noble looking youth – stretched upon a humble cot. He was pale, emaciated and anxious, far from kindred and home, vibrating, as it were, between life and death. Every stranger that entered [was] caught in his restless eyes, in hope of their being some relative or friend. President Lincoln observed this youthful soldier, approached and spoke, asking him if he suffered much pain. "I do," was the reply. "I have lost a leg, and feel I am sinking from exhaustion." "Would you," said Mr. Lincoln, "shake hands with me if I were to tell you who I am?" The response was affirmative. "There should," remarked the young Georgian, "be no enemies in this place." Then said the distinguished visitor, "I am Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States." The young sufferer raised his head, looking amazed, and freely extended his hand, which Mr. Lincoln took and pressed tenderly for some time."⁴

We are still feeling the wounds of that conflict, the seismic effects of slavery as well as of Civil War, and still working on true justice which is the prerequisite for lasting peace. This Superbowl weekend let's remember that the greatest heroes are those who live out the Sermon on the Mount, by God's grace measuring victory only by whether God's will is done, on earth as in heaven. Amen

¹ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years* (NY: Sterling, 2007), p. 20.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1 (rev. edition, The Daily Study Bible Series, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 138.

³<https://www.nps.gov/linc/learn/historyculture/lincoln-second-inaugural.htm>.

⁴ Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., Philip B. Kunhardt III, Peter W. Kunhardt, *Lincoln: An Illustrated Biography* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 191.

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