

A HOUSE DIVIDED

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We live in a turbulent time, a time that can be characterized, at least, in part, by uncertainty, diversity and a growing enmity. Every week seems to add a new chapter to the political stalemate in Washington—with each side blaming the other for the ineffectiveness of all.

While we have long held to the opinion that we are the “United” States, we can see that this may be more of an example of wishful thinking than realistic description. We live in a time in which the issues of our day have been divided us into red states and blue, a time in which there is a never ending swirl of controversies that tend to pit our opinions and our convictions against each other: **Terrorism...the economy...health care...growing economic disparity...sexual orientation...gun control...racial tensions...to name a few.**

And this turmoil, this disruption that we are experiencing, is not limited to the realm of our political institutions. It is becoming increasingly clear that no institution—including the institution of the Church—is beyond the influence of the controversy in which we live. The United Methodist Church, truth be told, is not all that United, but finds itself divided along many of the political and social and economic lines that separate red states from blue.

It is against this backdrop of turmoil and division that I would like to lift up the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, our sixteenth President. I think that you will agree with me that although 150 years separate our time from the time of Abraham Lincoln, there is a certain similarity between his world and our own. The tensions—regional... racial...economic...and religious—that were so tangible and volatile in the time of Lincoln, remain very much a part of the landscape of our own time.

In light of this similarity that we share, that I believe we would do well to consider the witness of Lincoln’s leadership and the great wisdom that he had to offer not only the people of his time, but our time as well.

I would like to do that this morning, by briefly considering the wisdom and insight of three of Lincoln’s important speeches. The first one given as he prepared to go Washington from Illinois as a Congressman in 1958. The second was delivered on the occasion of his first Inauguration in 1861. And the third, on the occasion of his second Inauguration in 1865. These three speeches, given over a course of approximately six years, provide us with important insight as to the nature of Lincoln’s leadership.

It is important to note that Lincoln’s wisdom was informed and, to some extent, shaped by the teaching of scripture. This is not to suggest that he necessarily espoused the conventional religious perspective of his day. Indeed, he did not. There was much in his thinking and his theology that took issue, for example, with the conventional wisdom that proclaimed that “God is on our side!” You may recall that it was Lincoln who suggested that

the real question was not whether God was on our side, but whether we happened to be on God's side.

On June 16, 1858, Abraham Lincoln accepted his party's nomination to run for the Senate against Stephen Douglas. In accepting this nomination, Lincoln spoke at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield. In what would become one of his more celebrated speeches, Lincoln outlined his conviction that the growing crisis facing the nation concerning the question of slavery could not long sustain itself. It was his premise that the issue must be addressed constructively or the consequences would be felt destructively.

Using the teaching of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark, Lincoln boldly stated his premise:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South.

It is interesting to note that, at this point in time, Lincoln had not concluded that the immediate abolition of slavery was possible. His desire was to contain it and prevent it from spreading to the new territories. As a newly elected Senator, Lincoln would do everything within his power to move the nation beyond its current impasse. He was hopeful that both North and South would find a way to resolve the issue in order that the unity of the nation might be preserved. It was that unity that was, for Abraham Lincoln, the ultimate goal.

It was this approach, of course, that would, in time, make Lincoln an object of anger, disgust and outright hatred not only in the South, but in the North as well. As far as the abolitionists in the North were concerned, Lincoln was not doing nearly enough to free the nation from the grip of slavery. In contrast, many in the South were convinced that Lincoln was overstepping his authority in a heavy handed and unlawful way.

In a time in which many were all too eager to retreat into their polarized camps and demonize those on the other side, Lincoln resisted the temptation to do so as he insisted upon treating those on all sides of this issue with respect and dignity. Needless to say, it took great courage for Lincoln to maintain his conviction of preserving the Union at all costs. It did not and would not win him any popularity contests, but it would, eventually, prove to be the vision that did, in fact, preserve our nation.

If we are to learn from the legacy of Lincoln, we would do well to begin by resisting the polarizing trends in our culture—trends that tend to demonize the intentions of the opposition even as we tend to sanitize our own motives and desires. As we are well aware, the consequence of this practice of polarization is not only to deepen the division that already exists, but to destroy the fabric that binds us together.

As Lincoln warned, a house divided against itself cannot stand. It was true in his time and remains just as true in our own time. We must find ways to work together for the greater good...ways that enable us to understand and value the opinions, ideas and beliefs of others.

It was on March 4, 1861, less than three years removed from his “house divided” speech in Springfield, that Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office and shared his inaugural speech. By this point in our nation’s history, Civil War appeared unavoidable—as it, in fact would prove to be. Confederate troops would fire on Fort Sumter not long after Lincoln gave this speech.

Yet, Lincoln was not willing to relinquish his hope for mutual understanding, trust and unity. After seeking to reassure the South of his intentions to abide by what he referred to as, the “constitutional checks and limitations,” he concluded his address by appealing, once again, to the sense of unity borne out of their shared history as a people.

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Abraham Lincoln believed in the inherent goodness of people and their desire to do the right thing. Some might suggest that, given the circumstance, this optimistic trust was not warranted. But I believe that Lincoln realized that this appeal to a shared sense of history and the noble intention upon which this history was built, was his last and best argument in favor of preserving the Union.

Whereas, Lincoln could have used his newly awarded power to strike a dominant pose that would seek to threaten and intimidate, he deliberately chose a different course—a course of reason and reassurance that appealed to the highest values that had shaped our nation. The fact that it was not enough to keep our nation from war was, in no way a reflection upon Lincoln’s weakness, but the weakness of others and their inability to rely upon “the better angels of their nature.”

Once again, the legacy of Lincoln’s leadership is one that serves to remind us that even in the midst of our diversity, there is a unity in reclaiming not only the memory of our past and the history that we share, but the values that have been so instrumental in giving shaped and definition to the people we have become—the values that lift our sights above self-centered pursuit to the other centered pursuit of the greater good. Such a focus reflects the “better angels of our nature.”

The last address that we will consider this morning, is the one that Lincoln provided at his second inauguration. The Civil War was nearly over and already there was talk in Washington about punishing the South and making the secessionists pay for the error of their ways. While it might have been tempting to revel in a moment of triumph and claim vindication from his critics, Lincoln refused to do so. In fact, he went out of his way to be

conciliatory to the South, recognizing that if the nation was to heal, the healing had to begin with his leadership.

Quoting Jesus's words from the Gospel of Matthew, Lincoln called upon those who were determined to practice revenge against their opponents: "Let us judge not that we be not judged." Some historians have correctly pointed out that it was Lincoln's focus on forgiveness and grace at this critical point in our nation's history that did, in fact, allow the long, slow and often painful process of healing to begin. His concluding words of this second inaugural address speak for themselves.

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.

In a time in which our own house finds itself divided, we can learn from Lincoln's legacy by choosing to follow his lead.

1. **We can learn to resist the temptation to give into the polarization that is currently quite fashionable in our culture.** We can recognize that truth isn't the sole province of one camp, one group, one party or another, but is something that can be discovered by learning to listen and to understand the perspective of others. Now, more than ever, we need to listen—truly listen—to what the other has to say.
2. **We can choose appeal to the higher nature in others—to recognize and trust the fact that they also have the deep desire within them to do the right thing for the right reason at the right time.** To assume anything less is essentially, to dismiss them and their concerns as less than honorable and less than acceptable. This, of course, doesn't mean that their intentions or values will necessarily be those that you share. But it does help to ensure a willingness and an openness to the other that can, at points, make all the difference in the world.
3. **Finally, we can practice a humble commitment to grace and forgiveness that will prevent us from giving into the very human desire to be right, to be the victor, to win the competition against the other.** We can, to put it very bluntly, refused to judge in order that we might not be judged. The fact remains that we are all broken, that we all make mistakes and that we all are dependent upon one another for the grace and forgiveness needed to move forward in our lives. True humility is an essential ingredient of the unity we seek.

In closing, allow me to make the observation that while I have referenced the leadership of Lincoln and the legacy that it offers to us, his was an approach that, in many respects, grew out of his understanding of faith and, more specifically, the teaching of Jesus. While Lincoln may not have fit the mold as a conventional, "Sunday go to meetin' Christian," he was deeply moved and shaped by the wisdom of Jesus and his insistence upon the need to value others by treating them with respect, dignity and equality.

Like Jesus, Lincoln understood that, ultimately, true leadership was not about gaining and wielding power for the sake of personal gain, but about using power, as a steward, in order to attain the greater good of all. Both Jesus and Lincoln practiced a form of “servant leadership” that was not necessarily very popular in their lifetimes, but in retrospect, they offered to us a vision of how we can best learn to live together and grow together as a people. The question is, “will we choose to take their words and their witness to heart?” In more ways than one, our future may well depend upon it. Amen.