

“Better Angels”
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Unity Church-Unitarian

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SERMON: “Better Angels”

What I remember was his face, so worn and weathered. I remember staring down at his picture while Mrs. Zimmerman, my second grade teacher, talked on about the two fathers of our country. To my seven-year-old eyes, Lincoln looked like a person who could be a father of a nation, willing to take on the burdensome responsibility of a nation’s wellbeing. He looked like someone I could trust. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was about him but at that time I didn’t understand what it was about a person that was or could be great.

I now know that I was looking at unlikely greatness, a genius bred from humility and ambitious vision. His melancholic but compassionate heart shines through in the photographs that remain. Now remember that photographs required long minutes of sitting or standing. Capturing a moment was not possible the way it is today. So, in the photographs that remain we are left with some essential, stripped down Lincoln. Recently, we have been addressing the growth of the human soul. Now we turn our attention to the soul of our nation. We begin this series looking at a leader who understood that leadership involved caring for the soul of our nation.

Abraham Lincoln was the father of our country because he held the soul of our nation closely. Rob has mentioned before that in preparing for a speech in the early days of his political career his first step was often to walk with a young sleeping child against his breast. These sleeping children, borrowed from a generous or needy neighbor, reminded him of the weighty task before him. He seemed to intuitively understand that to hold the least of us in his consciousness was a central task he had as a leader. He led in such a way that it was clear that it was the soul of our nation that he held against his breast throughout his days.

Lincoln possessed many rare qualities that we are in dire need of in today’s world. He was honest with those around him, but more importantly he was honest to himself. As historian Page Smith has written, “Honesty is not a quality. Honesty is a manifestation of character. Lincoln was honest because there was nothing small or petty about him.” He honestly cared for the individuals that comprised our country.

During the years of the civil war, Friday afternoons were set aside for the trials of soldiers charged with capital sentences due to crimes like desertion and falling asleep while on duty. He called these sessions “butcher’s day” and tried to attend as many as possible. He believed it was his duty to do so. He looked for any reason to pardon the soldiers. He termed them “leg cases:” “their legs were stronger than their courage.”

Forgiveness loomed large in his soul. He never held grudges. He was principled in his beliefs, but this did not prevent him from gathering people of diverse opinions around him. He knew when to stand firm, when to compromise and displayed an absolute genius for gathering individuals of diverse viewpoints and inspiring them to work together. His cabinet was comprised of former opponents and people with whom he disagreed on many subjects. He never lost sight of his larger objectives, which was always to lead our country the best way he knew how. He remained flexible in his approach. He wanted to hear all viewpoints before stating his own. He was known for taking the opposite view that he actually held to better understand the points of the opposition. He was not afraid to change his mind or admit that he was wrong. He readily admitted mistakes, apologized through humor and graceful tact. When I think of the hubris of leaders today of both political parties who are unwilling to even entertain the possibility of mistakes and miscalculations, Lincoln’s illuminating humility comes into even sharper focus.

At the conclusion of the war many people wanted Jefferson Davis to hang. Lincoln wanted only to forgive. He envisioned what he called a "generous peace" at the conclusion of the war. As historian Richard Hofstadter wrote, "Lincoln's utter lack of personal malice during those years, his humble detachment, and his tragic sense of life have no parallel in political history." Indeed, many of aspects of his character have no parallel in American political history. And we are much poorer as a result.

As the war was drawing to a close, Lincoln visited a hospital for wounded soldiers in Virginia. The people who traveled with him were surprised that he spent as much time consoling, comforting and conferring with Confederate soldiers as he did with Union soldiers. He was incredulous at their surprise.

Lincoln continues to be an inspiration to us today because he uniquely balanced compassion and determination, humility and ambition, acceptance of our shortcomings and imperfections but with an insistence that we hear the call of the better angels of our nature.

His humble upbringing provided him with first hand knowledge and deep faith in the common man and woman of this nation. He easily established rapport with them throughout his political career and they remained faithful to him for his entire career.

But above all, Lincoln believed in democracy and in the grand experiment in liberty, justice and equality that is our nation. He set a standard for all others who have followed in the decades and centuries since his presidency. This standard is something that we are called not to memorialize in sentimental terms, but rather to use to judge those who lead us today.

Lincoln was not afraid of challenging dissent or disagreement. In fact he cultivated it for the good of the nation. How different it is today when difference, disagreement and questioning of policy is defined as unpatriotic. Because Lincoln accepted his own human fallibility, he remained open to other's opinions. His standards still echo in the heart of our nation.

Now our country's character is defined by the divisions between us. We are the red and blue nation, full of distrust and disrespect for the other side. Last Christmas on the heels of the presidential election there was a house on Summit Ave. with not just one Christmas tree but two: one red and one blue. This year, I had secretly hoped that they would have just one tree this year and it would be purple. But no, again they had two trees: one red and one blue. I appreciate their apparent sense of humor, but the divisions in our country do not serve the soul of our nation; do not serve the wholeness of which we are capable.

Standing before the Lincoln Memorial I always find myself in tears. I grieve for a life cut short, a life which held such promise for a wounded nation in such need of his healing vision. My tears are for all of us and speak to the content of his character, to his understanding of the needs of our nation. We are in need of that kind of leadership today.

Lincoln's standards can be gleaned from his speeches and the manner in which he led our nation. He understood that he governed at a perilous time in our history. I believe that we are facing a perilous time as well and that we are in need of leadership that abhors arrogance and seeks diversity of opinion. We are in dire need of leadership that recognizes that policies need to be based on the premise of human dignity and worth and not the condescending view that we have all the right answers for everyone on the planet.

Contemporary political philosopher Jedediah Purdy recently wrote a brilliant book entitled Being America in which he examines our reputation and role around the globe. In this provocative book he challenges us to face the hard reality of the role we play in world politics. Purdy, who refuses to identify with either conservatives or liberals, demonstrates the ways that we are experienced as an imperial power everywhere but by ourselves. He argues that we can no longer afford a long held innocence about the role we play in world politics and the

democracy we promote around the world. We are not the liberators for freedom we perhaps once were and continue to see ourselves as being still. Historically, Purdy argues, America has been the liberator against oppressive forces in the name of security, basic human rights and human flourishing. But in our innocent determination to create democracies around the world we have ignored the work that is required to prepare a people for democratic self-government. We have denied the very human rights, the human dignity and worth which we have championed for so long.

A few years ago, Jonathan Sacks, the chief Rabbi of Great Britain wrote a book entitled The Dignity of Difference. Its subtitle read: "How to Avoid the Collapse of Civilization." This book is a plea for tolerance in an age of worldwide extremism. He writes: "Economic superpowers, seemingly invincible in their time, have a relatively short life-span: Venice in the 16th century, the Netherlands in the 17th, France in the 18th, Britain in the 19th, the United States in the 20th.

The great religions, by contrast, survive. Why is this so? My own view is that the world faiths embody truths unavailable to economics and politics. They remind us that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by the care they show for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless. The ironic yet utterly human lesson of history is that what renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable. The ultimate value we should be concerned to maximize is human dignity – the dignity of all human beings, equally as children of the creative, redeeming God.

According to Rabbi Sacks the mandate to maximize dignity is clear. The lesson of history is that individuals and institutions who rally around the banner of maximizing human dignity will endure. The reality is simply this: no political or economic system based on free human agency can survive if the agency of some is marginalized, or trivialized or invalidated.

We will flourish as a nation only as the individuals who constitute our nation flourish. By the same token, we will flourish as a world community only as the member nations flourish. This is not only good theology: it is good political and economic strategy as well.

Everything we have stood for as a nation – religiously, politically and economically – is founded on the premise that individuals should be healthy, thoughtful, productive and free. Only time will tell whether, as Lincoln put it, a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal, can long endure. Only time and our dedication to admit our mistakes and learn from them will tell *how* we will endure.

Our better angels are the voices of the marginalized and the least among us. Just as the child next to Lincoln's breast inspired him to greater wisdom, we need to hear from the people who feel voiceless.

"The mystic chords of memory" sound a note calling for diversity of opinion, for the richness achieved when all voices are heard around the table.

When Lee surrendered and word of it reached Washington DC, a mob gathered at the White House to celebrate. A band was quickly formed. The exhausted President was asked what tune he wished to hear. He humbly replied, "Play Dixie."

May we hear the sweetness of that tune once again. Like Lincoln, may we sing the song of our enemies, and in singing, may we be inspired to know them deeply.

May it be so and Amen.