

July 5, 2015
Psalm 23
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Beard

Light of Liberty

CHILDREN'S MOMENT

In our sanctuary in pew 23, Harriet Beecher Stowe had a vision that inspired her to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. We have visitors who come specifically to sit in pew 23. Many of our children attend Harriet Beecher Stowe elementary school here in Brunswick, Maine.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (5' tall) and Abraham Lincoln (6'4" tall) met in 1862. Legend has it that when they met, Lincoln said to Stowe, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war."

Harriet Beecher Stowe's faith called her to use her gift of storytelling to fight for the freedom of all people.

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Since this is the weekend of July 4 and this year is the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War and the death of Abraham Lincoln, I decided to remember Mr. Lincoln today. Especially I want to lift up his interactions with the religious community and his own religious proclivities and how it relates to our life today.

He once said of the Psalms, "They are the best, for I find in them something for every day of the week."

Psalm 23 plays a particular role in a story from his days as a young attorney in Illinois. This story was told by his contemporary, Gilbert Greene.

Mr. Lincoln invited Gilbert to go along on a visit to a dying woman who wanted to write her will. When the will was completed the woman told Mr. Lincoln that she was glad to have her affairs in order, that she did not fear death and was looking forward to seeing those who had gone before her. Mr. Lincoln replied, "Your faith in God is wise and strong."

When she asked him if he would read to her from the bible, he began reciting from memory the 23rd Psalm. Then he quoted the beginning of John 14, "In my father's house are many mansions..." After some other scriptures and hymns he ended with "Rock of Ages."

Shortly afterward, the woman died. On the way home, Gilbert expressed surprise to Mr. Lincoln that he had acted as a pastor as well as a lawyer. Mr. Lincoln replied, "God and eternity were very near me today." (mrlincolnandfriends.org)

SCRIPTURE READING Psalm 23

HYMN Rock of Ages

SERMON

My husband Ron and I just returned from some time in New York. One day we took the ferry to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. As we approached the Light of Liberty I was reminded again what a powerful symbol of hope it has been for so many. In April, Ron and I spent a few days in Washington, D.C. As we stood on the national mall with the capital on one end and the Lincoln Memorial on the other I was struck by the hard work of the people and our leaders to continue to live by the light of liberty.

In D.C. we went to Ford's Theater just about a week after the 150th anniversary of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. We sat in the theater watching a two man drama. The characters were Mr. Ford - the owner of the theater - and Mr. Hawk - the actor who was on stage when Lincoln was shot. The setting of the drama was a few days after the assassination. It was an emotional remembrance of the events of that day. As I sat there, I found myself hoping and trusting that God and eternity were very near Abraham on that day.

A couple of weeks ago we all awoke to the horrific news of a shooting, not in a theater, but in a church, Emmanuel AME (African Methodist Episcopal) in Charleston, South Carolina, where the pastor and eight others were killed as they sat in a Bible study circle. They were black and the man who killed them was white. From internet evidence it seems clear that was no coincidence. Dylann Roof apparently was motivated by white supremacy ideology - a tragic, ongoing, hateful and insidious undercurrent in our life together. He may have acted alone but there are others who have fomented his hatred.

A hundred and fifty years ago, Dylann Roof would likely not be held accountable for his actions. In those days, there were many churches in South Carolina and elsewhere where people believed that God was in support of slavery and that black people were not real people.

But there were other churches, like Emmanuel AME, where God's cry, "Let my people go," was heard loud and clear. For over 200 years this congregation has worked for liberty and justice for all, even worshipping underground when necessary. Their pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, worked for justice not only as a pastor, but also as a state senator. He, like Abraham Lincoln, was concerned about both religion and politics.

We often hear it said that religion and politics don't mix - usually when someone on one side or the other is trying to shut someone else up - but both these men - Abraham Lincoln and Clementa Pinckney sought to live integrated lives, paying attention to both religion and politics.

Rev. Pickney came to the conversation primarily as a pastor but when asked, he said, "There are many people who say, ... why would you as a pastor be involved in public life? Our calling is not just within the walls of the congregation, but we are part of the life and the community in which our congregation resides," (2013) (newrepublic.com)

President Lincoln came to the conversation primarily as a politician. Yet, he knew what it was to be driven to his knees, by what he described as the "overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day."

After Lincoln's Second Inaugural address (3/4/1865) just six weeks before his death, Frederick Douglas commented, that it sounded "more like a sermon than a state paper." Some have called it "a prayer of confession for the nation." In this address we see that Lincoln didn't think that human goodness would heal us from the horrors of slavery war. And he was right. Rather he called people to repentance and prayer.

On July 4th each year we remember our nation's vision of liberty and justice for all. Our founders made an amazingly radical proclamation, "That all men are created equal." Looking back we realize they didn't fully mean it. At the time they meant all white, landowning males are equal. However, it is a visionary statement that carries more power and possibility than even they realized. This proclamation has brought us, time and time again, as a nation, to repentance - with the abolition of slavery in the 1800s, suffrage for women in the 1900s, and most recently in the 2000s the Supreme Court decision on the right to same sex marriage. This vision of equality, this light of liberty, keeps challenging the status quo and opening up new possibilities.

Yet, history tells us that each time we make a legal commitment to liberty and justice for all in the public arena, correspondingly racism, sexism, heterosexism, move deeper underground and get disguised in new ways, sometimes even in new laws.

When Lincoln died we lost so much in our fight against racism. One thing we lost was his commitment to repentance, to changing our ways, to moving in a new direction. Without his stature and

commitment to the long road ahead, racism simply went underground with Jim Crow laws that were enacted to keep much of the power and economic imbalance of slavery still in effect.

We can imagine the jubilation of the Emmanuel AME congregation on the end of the Civil War. "Free at last, free at last; thank God almighty we are free at last." We can also imagine the anguish they experienced as the reality of Jim Crow settled in. Justice was again restricted by law.

Slavery was deeply intertwined with the economic structure of the United States. The textile mill at the end of our Maine Street used the cotton harvested by slaves in the south. When something is embedded in our economic wellbeing - no matter how it got there - the temptation to overlook injustice is mighty powerful. So much of the economic growth of the first hundred years of our country's life came on the backs of African slaves. So much of the accumulation of wealth for a few was possible at the mistreatment of so many.

We are still living with the consequences. One of the ways to honor those killed in Charleston is to listen carefully to their concerns. Rev. Pinckney was concerned about the underground character of racism in our criminal justice system. This past April, Pinckney held rallies in response to the shooting of Walter Scott by a white police officer in North Charleston. As a follow up, in his work as a senator, he was pushing for legislation for police officers to wear body cameras.

By and large most individuals working in the criminal justice system, I believe, want to be fair and just. But they, like us,

are often unaware of the systemic forces at work. Looking at statistics can help us see patterns that are beyond any individual. And the statistics are startling.

First of all the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world. With only 4% of the world's population, we have over 20% of the world's prisoners. In addition, studies show that racial minorities are treated differently. They are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be convicted, and their sentences are harsher. Drugs used primarily in poor, ethnic communities have harsher sentences than similar drugs more likely used by wealthier clientele.

Although there is evidence that the rate of imprisonment is slowing down, one of the most chilling realities is that at the present rates of incarceration, 1 in 3 black males born today can expect to end up in prison at some time in his life. That does not bode well for any of us.

I became more aware of the racial and economic disparities in the courts during the 1990s when we were living in Arizona. Since we lived on the border, there was a lot of publicity about the drug war. The attitude is that we would be tough on crime.

However, when a very wealthy white woman who had obtained and used drugs illegally was caught, she agreed to pay a fine and enter treatment in exchange for not being convicted. There was no public outrage. I suspect it didn't hurt that her husband was a U.S. Senator. I'm grateful that she received treatment. That's what everyone needs. For many poor, minority people the only treatment they receive is years in prison.

It is always a challenge for us to discern the difference between the law and justice. By law slavery was legal at the start of the Civil War. As the war was drawing to a close, there was fear, even with the Emancipation Proclamation, about what would happen to slavery in the south. Lincoln worked diligently to secure the passage of the 13th amendment abolishing slavery. It passed just two and a half months before he died and was ratified by the states after his death. Justice required a change in the law. Thank God for Abraham Lincoln.

Abraham Lincoln was a complex man. He is a much more appealing character in hindsight than he was considered at the time by many, including preachers. Many southern preachers saw him as the head of the "War of Northern Aggression," and many northern abolitionist preachers saw him as dragging his feet. From the perspective of our time we can see what a crushing spiritual burden he carried in leading our country through that horrific time.

He once (April 1862) said to the Rev. Noyes W. Miner: "... trusting in God for help, and believing that our cause is just and right, I firmly believe we shall conquer in the end." (Don E. and Virginia E. Fehrenbacher, editors, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, p. 330.)

May we too trust in God's help and recommit ourselves to a vision of liberty and justice for all. For as Rev. Pinckney reminds us, "Our calling is not just within the walls of the congregation, but we are part of the life and the community in which our congregation resides."