

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (*Independence Weekend*)

Proper 9, Year B

July 5, 2009 Randal B. Gardner

While the foundation of our nation's laws was laid in the Constitution, and the idealism that founded this country was put forth in the soaring prose of the Declaration of Independence, the reality of the nation we have become was forged in the Civil War, by far the bloodiest and most costly war we may ever wage.

By its end the Civil War re-established three central ideals that distinguished the United States from most of the nations of the 19th century. First among these ideals is that public law, forged in the ponderous conversations of a representative government, must prevail over all other claims to power and privilege. The second ideal, far more difficult to maintain, is that this nation is called to adhere to what is right. Apart from holding fast to what is right and good, this country forfeits its claim to be a nation of free citizens dedicated to liberty and justice. The third of these central ideals is a faith in the value of citizen government itself, believing that free people will ultimately agree to what is right, even though periods of insecurity, prejudice, and shortsightedness may confuse that vision for a generation or more.

If there is a leading figure in forging these three ideals, it is Abraham Lincoln. If there is a leading figure who shaped the moral conviction by which Lincoln led us through that terrible war, it is Frederick Douglass.

Lincoln and Douglass were unlikely characters to take such leading roles for the country. Lincoln was born in poverty and by the time of his election was so physically deformed by some genetic illness that commentators generally described him as gruesome. Douglass was the son of a slave woman impregnated by her white owner. That same man kept Douglass as a slave, but his wife taught the slave boy to read and encouraged him to desire freedom. Douglass escaped from his slavery in his twenties and fled to New England, where he gained a good reputation for his brilliant speeches and passionate writing. He remained a quasi fugitive until a group of British business men bought him his freedom in 1846.

Both Lincoln and Douglass had high intelligence and a gift for using language to move hearts and win arguments. Both were self-educated, and both were captivated by the dream of the United States as a City on the Hill, as a Beacon for all Nations. Lincoln learned the law and spent several terms in the state house.

He served one term as a congressman from Illinois and declined the political suicide of becoming the governor of the Oregon Territory, even though that position was graciously offered to him by President Taylor. Douglass founded his own newspaper, and his published essays on abolition and the need for education established him as a leading voice in the movement to end slavery.

Lincoln was elected because of his inspiring and sensible speeches, interspersed with folk humor and wisdom that endeared him to the people—at least the people of the North. Seven of the southern states seceded after his election, and several more were poised to do

so. Lincoln's initial approach was to act on the hope of conciliation, extending such olive branches to the South as the promise not to interfere with slavery, supporting a fugitive slave law that was harsher than any before it, and endorsing a constitutional amendment that would have made slave ownership permanent in any state where slavery was already practiced.

Douglass was outraged by how Lincoln turned away from the anti-slavery sentiments he had described in his campaign. In a series of essays published in his paper, and a series of letters to the President, Douglass reiterated time and again that God expected better of a nation and its President than compromises on the question of slavery. Lincoln was determined to limit the scope of the war if possible, and did everything he could to make it possible for the secession to end on terms Southerners could accept.

However, when Lincoln's son William died of typhoid fever in 1862, he was moved by a deep sympathy for all those who had already grieved the loss of sons to the growing war. That personal feeling for the war's cost began to move him toward a clearer resolve that the war's end should be for what was right and true, and shortly after his own personal tragedy he penned the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation.

In a series of speeches and letters that followed, Lincoln began to show a deep belief that the continuation of slavery would prevent the restoration of the Union, and for the sake of the Union the practice of slavery must be abolished. Douglass, who nearly left the United States in despair at Lincoln's earlier disregard for the interests of slaves, felt encouraged to remain and continue to express his hopeful vision for a nation not only freed of slavery but one in which an equality of races could bring forth a greater energy for good than any nation had previously achieved.

Now constantly encouraging, often in the form of criticism, Douglass used every possible method to shape Lincoln's growing resolve to make the issue of slavery the basis on which to win the war. Though costing him the support of many northerners who had no interest in sacrifice on behalf of slaves or freed blacks, Lincoln finally issued the Emancipation Proclamation and insisted that the abolition of slavery needed to have the force of an amendment to the Constitution.

Where Lincoln's genius met Douglass's more easily expressed Christian faith was in the resolve that the war's end must rest upon a clear practice of forgiveness. No punitive recourse was to be taken against the confederate soldiers, nor against those who had bought and sold slaves. Lincoln was able to express a deep faith in God's providence and in the stewardship of the good he was entrusted to serve as President, but he never wavered from the humility that kept him from claiming to know the details of God's will.

Lincoln's faith was clear that God had given a general moral outline for humanity, and in that faith he found the resolve to oppose slavery and to see reconciliation as the great theme of salvation. He never suffered the hubris to suggest that God loved the citizens of the North better than those of the South, or that Southerners were more evil than he was. Together these two remarkable men expressed a vision for the United States that clarified the untenable violation of human dignity which slavery was, that the restoration of common law applied to all equally — even through war — would be essential for the continuation of the great American experiment in liberty, and that the energy of the people — Northerners, Southerners, former slaves, and former slave owners — was at the center of the dream upon which the United States was founded.

Few declarations made in history are more radical, nor more hopeful, than words like "liberty and justice for all." Lincoln and Douglass carried this nation through its darkest period in history. By their moral vision and personal sacrifices they gave our nation a rebirth — "a new birth of freedom," as Lincoln put it — and restored for awhile the sense that ours was a nation given a chance by God to be a shining light for all people.

Having broken the yoke of slavery by enforcement, it has been the continuing recollection of their words and recitations of their characters that broke the yoke of slavery with moral force. Within a few generations the righteous imaginations of Lincoln and Douglass became the unequivocal truth for our nation. In the end their words have become the words of the American people, and by their inspiration our nation reaffirmed once more the radical claim that all are created equal.

In the end ours is a nation which exists solely for the sake of being righteous, in which liberty is not a license but a responsibility, in which the confusion every generation suffers eventually resolves into a capitulation of the truth and the restoration of a claim that we are called to be more than what other nations envision. Our nation exists for the very sake of demonstrating that God's gift of freedom to humanity was not a tragic error, but the ultimate hope of the creation.