

## Inauguration Sunday – 1/18/2009

I've had an unusual couple of weeks. I had a bad case of the flu the first week of January. And then this last week I was in Portland Maine taking care of my granddaughter Amelia, 8 months old, for reasons beyond the scope of this sermon. But this all means I haven't been as focused on the great moments we're anticipating and celebrating: Martin Luther King Day tomorrow, and on Tuesday the inauguration of our first African American president, Barack Hussein Obama. Alleluia!

What I did accomplish was to read most of Doris Kearns's monumental study of Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet, a book called *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. The book is smaller than a cinder block but bigger than a brick – about the size of 2 bricks, a 750-page study not only of Lincoln's own career but also of those of his chief competitors for the presidency in 1860 and how he incorporated them into the inner circle of government. It's an astonishing book, a book I wish had been written 25 years ago, and that I could have read 25 years ago, with the wisdom and understanding to use it as a guide in my life and work. I've read self-help books and books about leadership and books about politics, inspirational books, and some history. But I think I've never read anything that told me more about the qualities of leadership and the elements of political skill that combine to produce greatness.

As I read about Lincoln, Barack Obama was never far from my mind and heart. Nor was Jesus. We know of course more about Obama, even before he takes office, than we can ever know about Jesus. But we can imagine...

I learned, or relearned, in reading *Team of Rivals*, that the Civil War commenced just a month after Lincoln was inaugurated. Of course it was looming – it was the issue in the election of 1860, but Lincoln did not get a break- he did not have a honeymoon period, as we now say. He was considered an inexperienced, unsophisticated, maybe not very smart “railsplitter” and country lawyer, and he was nominated and elected largely because he was “available:” that is, relatively unknown and therefore without powerful enemies. He took office at the start of the gravest crisis in the young nation's history – the crisis that would determine if the nation could remain a nation, the crisis that would prove to the world whether a government “of the people, by the people and for the people” was a viable experiment. We know the answer now. But without Lincoln's wisdom and skill, the outcome of the War might have been otherwise, and our world might be a very different place.

Jesus, too, seems to have taken off rapidly in his public ministry. He spent 40 days in the wilderness, looking inward, acquiring self-knowledge, knowledge of the world's temptations, and God knowledge. And then he came forth, gathered a group of advisors around him – unlikely, unexpected sorts, and set about preaching, teaching, and healing. He was considered a nobody from nowhere: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Jesus lacked credentials in a dangerous and hostile world, but he seems undaunted, as Abraham Lincoln, 1800 years later, seems to have conveyed, generally, a sense of confidence and purpose that carried him forward.

And Mr. Obama – well, we know a great deal about his history, his character, his apparent confidence, and the challenges he, too, faces, in a dangerous and hostile world.

Lincoln's strategy for meeting the challenges he faced was to appoint his "rivals" to positions of importance and power; to utilize their undoubted strengths: William Seward, the odds -on favorite to have become President, as Secretary of State, Edward Bates as Attorney General, and Salmon Chase as Secretary of the Treasury. Another early adversary in the legal world, Edwin Stanton, became head of the War Department. Some of these men despised one another, or grew to do so in the course of their tenures. All of them began by underestimating, if not completely dismissing, Lincoln's intelligence and capacity for leadership.

And Jesus' disciples? We don't know so much about them. But the Gospels tell us that they disagreed among themselves, that they vied for power and privilege, that they questioned many of Jesus' decisions. We know that they were afraid, and that Jesus managed to calm their fears and anxieties, somehow, and to keep them moving forward till the end – and beyond the end.

We often hear of Jesus' impatience with his disciples; Doris Kearns documents, on the other hand, Lincoln's extraordinary patience with his cabinet and others in government who frequently opposed him, and sometimes betrayed him in unconscionable ways. But we have to believe Jesus, in the end, did have patience with the disciples, as all but one of them seems to have remained in his inner circle.

Mr. Obama's strategies will have to prove themselves. He has gathered around him, with amazing rapidity, an extraordinary team. Many have raised questions about his ability to manage so many "chiefs." And many have also criticized what seems to be a conciliatory, if not wishywashy, attitude to those whose worldviews seem very different from his own, and sometimes downright objectionable.

Lincoln's strategies raised similar questions and similar objections – sometimes ridicule, sometimes disbelief, sometimes angry despair. Abolitionists reviled him for insisting that the preservation of the Union, not Emancipation, must be the *causis belli*. Conservatives accused him of imperiling the Union. But he persevered with what we might call today a “big tent” approach. He solicited the expertise and advice of the best and brightest of his time, won the undying loyalty of most of them, and his strategy won the day, won the War, and preserved the Union.

Jesus, too, kept his raggle-taggle band of disciples together. And his strategy kept them loyal and faithful – with a couple of notable, and only one permanent, exceptions. Faithful beyond death, and committed to a Gospel that changed the world forever.

I said at the beginning that I wish I'd had this study of Lincoln to read and learn from decades ago. Because what is most remarkable and inspiring about Kearns's account of Lincoln and his leadership is not the extraordinary quality of his political skill, but his extraordinary qualities of heart.

Lincoln seems to have had an uncanny ability to rise above misunderstandings and misrepresentations, criticism, attacks, and betrayals. Simply, he seemed to be able not to take things personally, most of the time. He demonstrated, over and over again, a boundless capacity for understanding, tolerance, and forgiveness: of those who disappointed him through cowardice, stupidity, weakness, or overweening ambition; and forgiveness, even more remarkably, of the secessionists, the rebels, the apparent enemies of the Union he held so dear.

Lincoln was a man, as Isaiah says of himself, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. But the hardship and losses of his own life did not make him bitter; rather, they instilled in him confidence in his ability to prevail over adversity, in combination with deep personal humility and an unparalleled capacity for absolving others of wrongs they had done to him and to the nation. Of all the people I've ever studied, Lincoln exemplifies Jesus' command to forgive not only once, or seven times, but seventy times, or seventy times seven. And Jesus, I would like to think, would not have preached that lesson without practicing it himself.

Lincoln, as I said, was not an Abolitionist. He thought for years that the solution to “the Negro issue” was to resettle all Blacks in Liberia. But his ideas evolved. – and surely, the ability to change one's mind and feelings is a mark of maturity and largeness of spirit. Today, we might find even Lincoln's ultimate ideas about race – where he ended up– to be primitive and unenlightened. But he was a man of a different time.

Frederick Douglass, a leading African-American Abolitionist, was often frustrated by Lincoln's moderation and the deliberate way he approached his decision about Emancipation. He was a frequent public critic of Lincoln during his presidency. But when he met Lincoln in person, Douglass said, he was "the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, of the difference of color." Douglass felt with Lincoln "an entire freedom from a popular prejudice against the colored race." (Kearns, 208-9)

So while Lincoln's political calculations dictated a certain approach to race in America in his time, he received Douglass, as he seems to have received all he encountered, as a personal equal. In his heart he seems to have felt no "otherness."

As I've meditated about Abraham Lincoln these last weeks, what I come to at the end the virtue that seems to shine out more brightly than any other, is compassion. Compassion: feeling with. Compassion: not pity. Not feeling for, but feeling with. Buddhism calls compassion a trembling of the heart in the face of suffering. And Lincoln seems to have possessed that quality without limits. What others often interpreted as procrastination or indecisiveness in Lincoln was, in fact, his spiritual practice of taking in all sides, all points of view, and all the feelings that informed the ideas of others, and then, and only then, taking action.

I've not said anything about Martin Luther King, although we celebrate him tomorrow. And I've not said much about Barack Obama, whom we have been celebrating since November and who will become the leader of our nation on Tuesday. But I hope that in reflecting on Lincoln, I've reminded us all of certain qualities that make for greatness in a leader. And in my mind and heart I summon a holy gathering of leaders: Jesus of Nazareth, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Junior. I summon as well Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. I invoke them as several of the great angels of our common history, and my prayer for Barack Hussein Obama is that he may grow daily in mind and heart, and that history will place him in that small, astonishing crowd of those who have shown by work and example what the realm of God on earth might be, and might become.

Alleluia! Amen.