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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, Ct.
May 26, 2024
Ecclesiasticus 4:11-16, John 15:7-14

excerpts from "When Lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed" (Whitman)

A Memorial Day Reflection
"We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain"

(from the Gettysburg Address, 11/19/1863)

The celebration of Memorial Day began in the first few years following the Civil War, when women of the South started the tradition of laying flowers upon the graves of those who had died. As you may know, the Civil War was one of the most devastating wars in all of history if the numbers of the dead are weighed against the population of our country at the time.

There were single **days** when as many as 26,000 men died.

And it was a particularly bitter war that often-divided families – pitting brother against brother on opposing sides of the conflict. Mary Todd Lincoln herself had fourteen stepbrothers, eight of whom fought for the Confederacy. In the cemetery in the village of Hamburg, near the gravestone you see on the cover of this bulletin, there is a memorial stone for a man who (according to oral tradition) apparently took the first name Jefferson in solidarity with Jefferson Davis and the Confederate cause. And scattered around that stone are others commemorating soldiers who died fighting for the north. Twenty-one men from the town of Lyme alone died in the Civil War. And there were less than 600 men living in Lyme in those years. There were numbers of others who returned home alive, but died soon thereafter from their injuries.

Some years ago I came across a biography of Abraham Lincoln written by Joshua Shenk. His thesis is that Lincoln weighed the tremendous cost of war through the prism of his own personal losses, which were significant. He was a man, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "acquainted with grief." His mother died when he was young. He felt cast aside by his father. His son, Willy, died of typhoid during his presidency: an event that sent both he and his wife Mary into deep despair.

. Lincoln was deeply and emotionally engaged in the war. He wrestled with it not just from a distance, but in the most personal of ways. He wrote eloquent letters to a number of widows and children of soldiers killed in battle. And those letters were laden with painfully unbridled revelations of his own sorrows and losses. Some of those he delivered in person. One widow wrote of opening the door to find the President standing before her, in tears.

It is claimed that he carefully reviewed every case of the military court of justice of the time.

A young friend of Lincoln's was one of the first to die in the conflict. Elmer Ellsworth had clerked for Lincoln in his law practice in Illinois, and rode the Presidential train east alongside him for the inauguration. Ellsworth had "made a great reputation by leading a disciplined and colorful special militia that gave renewed hope to the Union." But on May 24, 1861, Ellsworth led a raid into Alexandria, Virginia, during which he was shot and killed.

Moments after the news was delivered to Lincoln, a senator and reporter came to see the President. They found him staring out the window. "Excuse me," Lincoln said, with his voice breaking, "But I cannot talk." He began to cry and to walk around the room in silence. Some moments later he added, "I make no apology, gentlemen, for my weakness. I knew poor Ellsworth well and held him in high regard. (The news of his death) has quite unmanned me." (Shenk 2005:176). An interesting choice of words. I don't see anything "unmanly" about those tears Lincoln shed.

In 1864, when the war had already been waged for three years, Lincoln wrote, “War, at its best, is terrible. And this war of ours, in its magnitude and duration, is one of the most terrible. It has deranged business…torn apart families and ruined homes… and produced a national debt and taxation unprecedented. It has carried mourning to nearly every home, until it can almost be said that the heavens themselves are hung in black.” (Shenk 2005:203)

Lincoln believed in the cause for which the war was waged. And yet he was plagued by doubts. Would the nation turn against him? Would they unseat him in the next election, and then, under different administration, change course? In which case all the suffering would be for naught. Did the grievous cost in human lives far outweigh the ethical validity of the cause? He was tormented by these questions. He dialogued them with his Cabinet frequently.

His was **not** a demeanor marked by bravado and self-righteousness. The writer of Ecclesiasticus might well have described Lincoln when he said, “The greater you are, the more humble you must be… and the Lord will show you favor, for the Lord reveals His secrets to the humble.”

Soldiers fighting for the North were convinced that God was on their side, and they proudly recited the lyrics of Julia Ward Howe’s hymn “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”

“Mine eyes have seen the Glory of the coming of the Lord.

He has trampled out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.

He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:

His truth is marching on.”

Meanwhile, soldiers on the side of the South was absolutely sure God was on their side. Fashioned on the seal of the Confederacy was the inscription Deo **Vindice.** “God will vindicate.”

Lincoln cut straight through it all, saying, “Both sides may believe that God stands beside them, but in the end, one must be wrong. We must work earnestly in the best light God Almighty has given us, trusting that so working conduces to the great ends He ordains.”

Once a minister remarked to Lincoln something along the lines of “I hope the Lord is on our side.” Lincoln replied that he didn’t really see it quite that way; adding, in substance, “I can only **hope** we are on the Lord’s side. (Shenk 2005:199)

He was, it seems to me, courageous enough to look at the full breadth of the situation, and to assess what lay before him. He was strong enough, humble enough, to give credence to his doubts. And he had the stamina and moral turpitude to live in that place of tension between believing that he was doing the right thing for the right reason, and acknowledging the possibility that he could be wrong. And the cost? He knew the cost was dreadful.

Amos Wilder was professor of ethics at Harvard Divinity School at the time of WWII. He explored extensively the painful question of what constitutes a **Just War.** It’s a question debated by theologians to this day. It’s a question – a question of balance – that drives the international court as it rules in the charges in the war between Israel and Hamas.

Having never sent a son to war, or watched a husband or father depart for war, I do not feel adequately invested to be able to answer – even for myself- the question about what constitutes a just war. But I’ve seen more than enough death in my 7 decades of life; and I can say with assurance that life is precious and precarious. Life is fleeting. Life is Holy. And every death falls hard upon my soul.

Seeing on the nightly news the ravages of war in the Ukraine and the enormous and egregious loss of life in Gaza, I know for sure that the human suffering I witness almost daily ravages my soul.

And while we can speak about the cost of the Civil War with the somewhat cool, almost surgical, objectivity borne of the distance of 150 years, we **now** understand that the real cost of war is multiplied exponentially by something we refer to blithefully as "collateral damage." Women and children and the elderly and infirm. Homes and hospitals. Aid workers and journalists. Farms and businesses. Artists and poets. Old age homes and museums. Lives reduced to rubble. And not only the past – but the future lies in ruin as well.

Tomorrow I'll visit the grave in Lyme of a man who would be about 115 years old, if he were still alive. He was a childhood friend of my father's who served in the Army during WWII. And in a real sense, he fought that war over and over again every day of his life thereafter; even when he was home in the peaceful village of Hamburg.

As a child I knew him simply as a gentle-spirited man who sat every night on the stone wall beside the little general store in the center of town. He was unassuming, thin and shy, and he worked on the town road crew for all the years that I knew him.

At the end of each work day he sat on that wall, making conversation with anyone who would take the time to sit with him for a while. My mother, sending me up the hill to the store for something she needed, would often say, "Stop and talk for a few minutes. He's a lonely man."

He drank his dinner – and some comfort – from a can. Sometimes he would lapse into the telling of war stories, in a broken and rambling and somewhat incoherent way.

People in town took care of him and protected him. They often drove him home when he'd sat on that wall long enough. The town sent his paycheck to the woman who ran the store, and she saw to it that he had a can of something to cook for dinner when he arrived home.

Never, in my memory, was he ridiculed or held in low regard. He was a broken man. And the people of the town paid him a kind of quiet homage, perhaps knowing that his brokenness was a price he had paid on their behalf. For he gave his life at Normandy just as surely as if he had taken a fatal bullet on that beach.

His story is one of the human stories of war. And I believe there are hundreds of thousands of veterans whose stories would be much like his. Though in our day I am willing to guess very few of them are as tenderly cared for by their home town, as he was.

Tomorrow, as the parade passes by, I'll think of that older gentleman. I wish that the music and costumes and pride of those who march along could even begin to adequately honor the sacrifices he, and others like him, have made. The truth is: it won't, really. But keeping alive their stories does, at least in part, bring some measure of respect and honor for all they have given, and all we have lost.

But in truth the **only** thing that will honor the staggering loss of life of all the wars in which this country has been engaged, is if we courageously, insistently, continuously ask of ourselves if we're living up to the challenge Abraham Lincoln set before us in his address on the battlefield at Gettysburg on November 19, 1863.

"Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men (and women) are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We here are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, not long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain: that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

The legacy to which Lincoln gave voice- inherently the legacy left to us- is in the largest sense of the word, the nation itself. A nation founded to be a "city on a hill" on which the eyes of the world would be focused. A nation, called forth by our Puritan forefathers to follow the counsel of Micah; to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God… knit together as if we were one… willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of others' necessities… honoring our commission as members of one body.

These are deep, deep values. John Winthrop would have called them Christian values- but in truth they are values shared by all three of the Abrahamic faiths. **Charity and generosity and a calling to care for "the least of those among us."** Hear again that phrase: "We must abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of other's necessities." **Brotherly love and humility.** Hear again those words of John and words found throughout the Torah and the Koran as well: "Love one another." The gospel of John says it this way: "Love one another as I have loved you." **Accord and harmony and peacefulness among ourselves.** Hear again those words of Winthrop: "As if we were one body."

In 1858, three years before becoming President, Abraham Lincoln wrote a now famous essay entitled "A House Divided." He wrote it because he saw a faction of powerful political interests uniting to try to preserve the institution of slavery, while he himself sided with the Abolitionists who believed slavery, ultimately, would need to end. Those powerful interests sought a split whereby some states could continue on with legal slavery. Other states could abolish the right to own slaves. This powerful faction, which formed a united front, sought to divide the nation. Very powerful interests they were – orchestrated by powerful and influential men with a great deal of money. Lincoln thought this divided structure would, ultimately, destroy our democracy.

"A house divided against itself cannot stand," he wrote.

Friends, we are in a not dissimilar position ourselves in our country right now. What was true then is true now. People with power are promoting self-serving interests, rather than the founding principles of this nation. And a house – a nation – divided against itself cannot stand.

Special interests who have their own agenda – without respect for the founding principle that we are ALL created equal, with equal rights to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness - have risen in power and thirst for control. And they have thrust our national house into what we know as a "house divided against itself." A house where charity and generosity and brotherhood and sisterhood, as our Puritan forefathers preached, are no longer important. Or at least- important to them.

We who sit among these pews – and we who take the pulpit to preach – may not – each one of us – see this reality in exactly the same way. But the truth is that we inhabit one nation. And we are called to the principles that have given birth to, and permeated, this nation's history since its founding over two hundred and fifty years ago. And countless people have given their lives to preserve this union, this democracy, this experiment in shared governance, this foray into the core values of faith in God.

This is no time to fall asleep. Or to sit on the sidelines. Or to pretend that it's too hard to care and work for what is right.

A few weeks ago, the town of Lyme placed a plaque of dedication on a new bridge on Birch Mill Road, in the village of Sterling City, in the little town of Lyme. The bridge is dedicated to the man who fought, and lived his whole life continuing to fight, the demons that threatened our world in WW II. They honored him and his service.

We must honor him, too. As well as the countless others whose lives were lost. They believed they were in a noble fight.

And the noble fight continues. Amen.