

Virtues of Renewal

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Galatians 5:13-15

Shortly before his 29th birthday in 1838, Abraham Lincoln produced the first expression of an idea which was to play an important part in his mature thinking a quarter of a century later. It concerned what would later be called “The American Dream.” Because he was a student of history, he knew that many societies had arisen and flourished for a while, and then had disappeared. Lincoln wondered, would this also be true of the society that had arisen in what he called, “the fairest portion of the earth?” Lincoln was convinced that failure, if it should come, would not come by military aggression from the outside, or even from migrant families seeking asylum from Mexico and Central America. No, he was convinced that failure would come from inner decay. He wrote: “*At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reaches us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction comes, we must ourselves be its author and*

finisher. As a nation of free persons, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.”

It was this theme of the endurance of the republic that drew from Lincoln, on more than one occasion, his most memorable and most eloquent phrases, including two unforgettable references in the *Gettysburg Address*. What was being tested, he said, was “whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” The theme provides the conclusion to his address with these words, “shall not perish from the earth.” Almost a year earlier, in his *Second Annual Message to Congress*, the President had already reached what may be the height of his eloquence when he said, “We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last, best hope of earth.”

With all of their faults, and they had many, Lincoln and the Founding Fathers' perception of *The American Dream* is one of nobility. But Lincoln also knew that noble things can be lost, if the conditions of survival are not met.

It is now 159 years after the death of Abraham Lincoln, but the concerns he shared are just as relevant now as they were when he was alive. We should know that however rich our material resources may be, these are never enough to keep our society vibrant and alive. Many human societies have already failed despite the abundance of material wealth. We should know that this country's institutions can become flawed and corrupt given the right political circumstances. Unethical persons who lack a concern for the welfare of their constituents, and Supreme Court Justices who are supposed to care for the least of these in our society, can become so political in their ideology that they can pass laws without precedent and chip away at our constitution. We should know...

Throughout this past week, Lincoln and our constitution have been weighing heavily on my mind and heart. As a result, I am more convinced than ever that the *best hope* for our society, or any society's continued existence resides in its *spiritual resources* and in the faithfulness with which these resources are preserved.

In brief, and on this weekend of our nation's Independence Celebration, *how do we begin to renew our spiritual roots?* Besides the obvious living out of our Quaker Testimonies of Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship that we would all like to see practiced throughout the world in which we live, I would like to suggest the recovery of five important virtues...virtues which I have shared with you before, and have never been more needed than right now.

The first virtue is COURAGE...In brief, this means to believe in what you believe in without the fear of consequences. To recover courage within each of us and our nation would mean to stand for the right without being self-righteous, and to do the right thing, even if no one else knows about it. Courage requires us to speak out against the growing cancer of "Christian Nationalism" and all of the racist and extremist qualities that term implies, and to resist the tactics of fear and "Gas Lighting" that politicians use to get elected.

The second virtue is COMPETENCE...Competence requires the ability to think reflectively and critically on how to deal with the complexities of modern life. Packaged slogans and scapegoating migrants for all of our problems are not an adequate response to the issues we face as a country. Competence means that any solutions suggested need to be critically evaluated and questioned before adopted. Competence is about fact-checking what people say, and providing persons with a philosophy of life which *ethically* undergirds their actions.

The third virtue is CIVILITY...The examples of our society's lack of civility are everywhere. Every time someone is bullied by a Tweet or Facebook posting...Whenever harsh and abusive language is used by persons of differing political beliefs to put people down and wound hearts...When road rage on Interstate 71 causes one to lift his or her middle finger or even a gun, and whenever someone cuts in line in front of you, a lack of civility is demonstrated. If our society is to be renewed, then the recovery of civility, a civility that

recognizes we are in community with one another, must be a part of that renewal.

The fourth virtue is CONSCIENCE...To cheat on taxes, to lie, to do sloppy work, are all a part of the loss of conscience in our society.

Finally, there is the virtue of COMPASSION...Such compassion means to “suffer with” and to have your own soul ache each time a cruelty is done to another. In the words from the musical, Camelot, we would do well to seek within ourselves and within our nation, the truth that *compassion is not weakness and violence is not strength.*

In the passage from Scripture which I read earlier, the Apostle Paul notes that the Galatians were “called to freedom.” His concern is that the freedom to which they are called will be misused. In other words, some of the members of the churches in Galatia were not playing well together. Paul warns them, “if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.”

Paul’s concerns for the Galatians are the same concerns that Abraham Lincoln had for Americans. “If you bite and devour one

another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.”

Lincoln was a student of the Bible, and so I am sure that he knew this passage well.

As for me, I like to consider myself an *optimist*. I am reminded of the words from our Quaker Founder, George Fox, whose 400th birthday we celebrate this month, words that I turn to often these days, “*I saw that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness.*” I am cautious, but I continue to believe in the *infinite ocean of light and love*. Such Light and Love can find expression in the process of renewal, a renewal that is no longer just an option, but an absolute necessity if we are to survive as a nation. Such renewal, I am convinced, can begin with each of us, as we work to recover the virtues of *Courage, Competence, Civility, Conscience and Compassion* in what Lincoln referred to as the *last best hope on earth*.