

"LOVE, LEADERSHIP AND LENT"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The calendar reminds us that today, February the 14th, is Valentine's Day and that tomorrow, February the 15th, is Presidents' Day and two days later is Ash Wednesday and so for want of a better title for today's sermon, I have chosen to simply go with "Love, Leadership and Lent". Alliteration...three words that begin with the letter "L" and if you want a fourth word that begins with "L" that should connect up with the other three, it would be the word "loyalty".

Yes, loyalty to those we love. Loyalty to the country we love. And loyalty to Christ whose journey into the wilderness commemorates the season of Lent. Love. Leadership. Lent. And loyalty to all three.

WELCOME TO THE "SONS"

We welcome the Sons of the Revolution and we are honored by your presence with us again. This service helps to commemorate the life of George Washington. It also provides us with an opportunity to memorialize members of this patriotic organization who have died this past year. And this we shall do at the end of the service...prayers and the playing of taps will follow. I hope that you will note that one of the "daughters" of the American Revolution read the scriptures. Those of us who know her and love Jan know that across the years her "revolutionary" spirit has always had a positive influence in the life of this church.

WASHINGTON

I like to remind the children of our church and Sunday School that even though George Washington was a busy man moving up and down the eastern seaboard of our land (without the benefit of Amtrak), he always tried to find time to slip into church and attend a service. It was his practice to always sit on the front row...straight and tall...so that others might be aware of his presence for he wanted people to know how he felt about the church and the things of God and the importance of making a personal witness. Yes, indeed...a busy man, but he always disciplined his time and day to "make it" to church....straight and tall on the front row.

Oh, the cynic might be tempted to accuse him of having other reasons for being there....which is distressing, for I believe that anyone who is "out front" and leading others needs to avail himself or herself of the resources of the spiritual side of life.

Those who are a part of this organization have loved country and have served it well in different ways. I think of one of your members whom I have known for over 40 years, Colonel Harding Isaacson who because of illness is unable to be here this morning, a man whom we have "lifted up" many a Sunday in our prayers. He is the only man I have ever known who proudly wears the French Legion of Merit, I believe it is, for heroism in World War II. Please remember me to him.

Love for country has been one of the "marks" of the Sons of the Revolution. We salute you for it. Leadership has been another "mark" of those who have led and served our country. Leadership means taking a risk. It means not taking "no" for an answer. It means having breadth of vision. From what little I know of George Washington, he took risks, did not take "no" for an answer and was a man of vision.

Somehow he managed to keep together his little army that was ill-fed, ill-clothed and it's widely known that his own strength of character, and the ability to hold the confidence of the army and people and to diffuse his own courage among them along with his gifts of common sense and unremitting activity constituted the chief factors in achieving victory. His sternness as a disciplinarian was also a strength of character.

And after the Revolution, in 1787 when the constitutional convention assembled, he was called to preside over it and the weight of his character had much to do to insure the success of that convention. Yes, leadership involves risk taking and stepping out in front of others and responding to "the call". He once said that he would "take his musket on this shoulder whenever his country called him".

LOVE AND LEADERSHIP IN OUR TIME

In preparing some thoughts and notes for today's sermon, I found myself coming back to something that happened in February 1943. The date was actually the 3rd of February, 1943. It involves four men who responded to the "call" from their country. I was a boy of 13 and remember well this scene which I shall sketch for you.

Four chaplains - a Catholic, a Jew, a Methodist and the fourth from the Reformed Church in America, gave their life-jackets to others as their torpedoed troopship sank into the icy waters of the North Atlantic, not far from Greenland. They were last seen helping others into life rafts and then "arm-in-arm" they bowed their heads in prayer as they slipped beneath the waves. The selfless heroism of those four men and their witness to their belief in interfaith solidarity has been lifted up many times across the past 50 years at worship services of many faiths and usually in the month of February. That act of heroism touched many of us at that time including myself.

Let me describe in greater detail what happened. In the icy dawn of that February morning, the USAT Dorchester, an old ship, hastily pressed into service as a troop transport was pushing through the waters of the North Atlantic with 902 American servicemen on board for England. Bound that morning for Greenland, she was close enough to her destination that her convoy had left her, but she did not make it. A Nazi submarine had been stalking her undetected and now, with the convoy gone, the sub sent a torpedo slithering through the murky waters straight for the old ship's flank. The deadly missile struck amidships and exploded in the boiler room. Many died instantly. Others were trapped below the deck. Jolted from their bunks, sleep soldiers and sailors clambered to reach the decks of the stricken ship.

On deck, amid the confusion and terror, four US Army Chaplains were moving about calming frightened men, directing bewildered soldiers to lifeboats and distributing life jackets with calm precision. The supply of jackets was soon exhausted, but four young soldiers stood waiting. They were afraid and had no life jackets. Quickly the chaplains stripped off their own and forced them upon the young soldiers. The four men of God had given away their only means of saving themselves in order to save others.

Men rowing away from the stricken ship in lifeboats saw the four chaplains clinging to each other on the slanting deck. Their arms were linked together and their heads were bowed. They were praying to the one God whom each of them loved and served - the God of all creation!

One of the things that touches me about this beautiful epic of heroism is that these four chaplains were of different religious faiths and backgrounds. Clark V. Poling from Schenectady, New York and George L. Fox of Vermont were ministers of the Protestant Church...Poling, from the Reformed Church of America (known better in this city as the Collegiate Church), and Fox, a United Methodist from Vermont (with ties to the Troy Conference of the Methodist Church. John P. Washington was a priest of the Roman Catholic Church and Alexander D. Goode was a Jewish Rabbi. YET, in that crucial moment of decision, none of them paused to ask the young soldiers on the sinking deck of the Dorchester, "Are you a Protestant?", or "Are you a Roman Catholic?", or "Are you a Jew?" It did not matter. Before these four chaplains stood four human beings in desperate need and they all had committed themselves to serve God and their fellow man. I should like to think that today's service is in keeping with the spirit of those four men.

LINCOLN The calendar also reminds us that Abraham Lincoln celebrated a February birthday....two days ago on February 12th. He, too, is a part - an important part - of this Presidents' Weekend celebration.

One of the high moments of my life was when I was 18 and I was invited to deliver from memory Lincoln's Gettysburg Address at the Memorial Day exercises in my hometown upstate. Riding with the mayor of Gloversville in an open car behind the High School band of fifty or more that was playing The Stars and Stripes for ever, I felt good and proud to be an American. The Gettysburg address went well, all from memory but I doubt if I could do it today.

The privilege of offering that remarkable speech was always given to the High School student who took first prize in a public speaking contest, the Lucius Littauer Contest...in which I prepared and delivered a twenty-minute speech on the Five Pillars of American Democracy. One pillar were those moving and memorable words from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address which have a remarkable breadth of spirit. Hear them again:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God has given us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work which we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphans, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Certainly words which hold their place among the inspired utterances of all time...with compassion and love and forgiveness and courage and justice..."marks" of the Christian spirit.

LENT Love. Leadership. Lincoln. Loyalty. And the final "L" is for Lent....that time of the year for the serious Christian to examine his or her heart and put it right with God. A time of reflection. Years ago I came across some words penned by Phillips "O Little Town of Bethlehem" Brooks for his parish at Trinity Church in downtown Boston. I love the words and many of you are familiar with them for they've been part of Ash Wednesday here for many years. Said he:

"My friend, Lent is here. There is no magic in its days. It is only that we have resolved 'til

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 14, 1999

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of welcome to the visitors...delighted to have you here with us and we hope....be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card...or sign one of the Guest Books. Come, worship with us...come, work with us...
- B. We've been doing the "Lord's Work" at this busy corner....since 1837. Martin Van Buren was in the White House. Queen Victoria had just started her reign. Fourth building. Roots are deep. We minister here in the name of Christ AND IT IS in His loving spirit that...
- C. Members: wear name tags. Greet a visitor...greet a child, too. Tempted to buy some pecans...see Julie Klein....some still available.

SONS OF THE REVOLUTION

- A. We offer a special welcome to the Sons of the Revolution....been with us before, and their presence adds a colorful and moving note to our celebration of Presidents' Weekend. I shall say a few more words about the "Sons" and "Daughters" as part of the sermon.

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are "highlighted" for you in the bulletin. Please review them on your own noting that Lent begins this coming Wednesday and the Sacrament of Holy Communion will be offered....also note that our Winter Rummage Sale is "in the works" for this coming Saturday, the 20th....10 to 3. Workers are still being enlisted....
- B. The Membership Committee is launching a special project which will benefit the church in days to come and here to tell you about it is Margaret Bratton, co-chairperson of the Membership Committee...
- C. Note the rose on the altar today...there in celebration of the birth of KONSTANDINOS ERNEST ZAHARAKIS...January 9th. Steven and Laura...Roosevelt Hospital.

OFFERING:

"It is more blessed to give
than it is to receive!"