

"WHAT WOULD LINCOLN SAY"

INTRODUCTION During the Lenten Season of 1961, Bishop Herbert Welch, the oldest living Bishop of the Methodist Church, preached from the pulpit of this Church. Bishop Welch, at that time, was 98 years of age. This past summer he visited the city of Portland, Maine. He was greeted by the press at the airport and the following day his picture appeared on the front page of the Portland Press Herald along with an interesting article. One sentence in that article caught my attention and fired my imagination. I wrote it down in my notebook thinking that it might tie into this sermon.

"The oldest living Bishop of the Methodist Church was born on November the 7th, 1862, the day that Abraham Lincoln fired General George B. McClellan as commander of the Union Army".

Bishop Welch, now in his second century, now 102 years of age, is for me and perhaps for many of you the one personal living link with the age of Abraham Lincoln.

DEVELOPMENT Without a doubt, Abraham Lincoln, whose birthday we celebrated on Friday, is foremost among those great and noble men who spoke to other generations as well as their own. His own generation - to an unusual degree - recognized the greatness in Lincoln, who has so appropriately been called "a man of steel and of velvet". This weekend we recall some of the glorious phrases that have stirred men's hearts and minds down through history:

"With malice towards none, with charity for all....."

"Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation....."

"The ballot is stronger than the bullet....."

As we think of the life of Lincoln, it is fair to ask ourselves what would Lincoln think, say or do if he were alive today. I think that there is sufficient evidence and guidance in his speeches, his letters, his papers of state to determine his basic beliefs and course of action.

I. THE CHURCH AND RELIGION First, if Lincoln were alive today he probably would take a long and very thoughtful look at the church. There would be some things, I'm sure, that would bother him just as they bother many of us. In his own time, he was apparently disturbed by the excesses of revivalist preachers in camp meetings who preached hell and damnation but who had very little to say about human misery and human suffering in the here and now. These frontier revivalists promised an eternal reward in the hereafter but were many times strangely silent about the things that were hurting the body politic. I think he would be disturbed in our time of the silence on the part of many church people and many branches of the church over conditions of human suffering in our day.

A great deal, of course, has been written about Lincoln and his religious beliefs. The Bible and John Bunyan, we are told, were his earliest text books. He knew his Bible well. We know, too, that he was not a "conventional Christian". He never, for instance, united with any church. However, he did attend the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington from time to time. A rocking chair was kept in an area adjacent to the lecture room of that church for Lincoln was fond of Dr. Gurly who was then pastor. Though he was never enrolled as a Christian on the rolls of any church, Lincoln had a set of religious beliefs and convictions that guided and sustained his life. They were based on the teaching of the Bible that all men "are stamped with the Divine Image and likeness". He believed, too, that the Almighty determines and directs the course of history with "righteousness and justice" constantly in view.

Reinhold Niebuhr writing in this week's Christian Century makes this claim in the opening paragraph of an article entitled, "The Religion of Abraham Lincoln" "that Lincoln's religious convictions were superior in depth and purity to those held by the religious as well as the political leaders of his day".

Lincoln, of course, believed that this nation by denying freedom to the Negro had brought down divine judgment upon itself. And no prophet of Israel ever spoke more straightforwardly than did Lincoln when he said it seemed possible that a just God might allow the Civil War to continue,

~~"until all the wealth piled up by the bondman's 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid for by another drawn by the sword...."~~

These are harsh, stern, unsentimental words.

These words from the Second Inaugural, carved in granite on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial, come to mind:

"What good would it do for people to suffer...what good would it do for lives to be laid down by just and loyal patriots unless some good might come of it? A new birth of freedom should be the response of a nation under God"

You often hear it said that if only Lincoln had lived through the massive problems of the Reconstruction period that things would have been different. We do not know what might have happened. We can only surmise. We know that Lincoln never once uttered a vicious word against the people of the South. Incredibly, the man who despised slavery never had any hatred against those who believed in it. He said on one occasion: "They are just what we would be in their situation". One of his favorite Biblical texts was that word from Matthew: "Judge not that ye be not judged". However his untimely death at the hands of the assassin prevented him from carrying out his high design of pacification and launched the nation into a terrible period characterized by the vindictive crushing of a vanquished foe - a disaster from which we have not yet recovered. Niebuhr in this same article that I referred to earlier says this:

"The stubbornness of the south's resistance to the present integration movement is part of the price we pay for the vindictiveness which Lincoln would have avoided"

Lincoln was a thoughtful, well read man who apparently felt the presence of God in his life and time and time again his secretary came into his study in the White House and found him on his knees in prayer, for, said Lincoln, "There is none other to whom I may turn". Yes, I think if he were alive today, he would find a church in which he would feel welcome, a church where men and women, boys and girls from all walks of life would be putting into practice the things they believe in their hearts to be right. He would rejoice in the church that is relevant. He would have little patience with the pettiness of denominationism and the legalistic quibbling of sectarian voices. He would rejoice in the growing unity of the church of our time.

II. HUMAN RIGHTS

Secondly, if Lincoln were alive today, he would be deeply concerned with the importance of civil rights for all Americans regardless of race or color or creed.

I doubt if he would feel very much at home with some of the super-patriots of our time who spend their time condemning anyone who disagrees with their own

narrow interpretation of the truth. He would take a dim view of much that is called "Americanism" that is preached and spread by some who have not the slightest sense of human let alone Christian charity in their make-up. "There is no grievance" he said, "that is a fit object of redress by mob law..."

On one occasion when bigots attacked him, he said:

"When the know-nothings get control, it will read, 'all men are created equal, except foreigners, Negroes, Jews and Catholics'. When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense at lvoing liberty - in Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure and without the base alloy of hypocrisy"

I think Lincoln would enjoy the company and endorse the methods of non-violence as used by Martin Luther King. He would acknowledge that patience and understanding and education and persistence and encouragement must be a part of any struggle for human rights. He would be deeply grieved that the cause for which men gave their lives one hundred years ago has become a divisive factor in our own democracy.

III. STAND FIRMLY Thirdly, if Lincoln were alive today, he would stand firmly, and if needs be, alone, for fundamental principles of righteousness as a reflection of his belief in a living and vital God.

Lincoln is often described a "a man of the people" and in a way nothing could be less accurate. He was very much apart from the people, and in his lifetime few understood him. The moral quality we think of on Washington's birthday is honesty. The moral quality we should remember on Lincoln's birthday is the courage of loneliness.

Whenever we feel lonely and unappreciated, whenever we find it hardest to go on trusting our own best values, whenever we worry about being unattractive, or socially ill at ease - that's when we remember Abe Lincoln and love him the most - that unfortunate, awkward and very great man. The courage of loneliness - he had it. He was not afraid to stand firmly for what he believed to be right. On one occasion, he said:

"I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have. I must stand with anybody who stands right; stand with him while he is right and part when he goes wrong".

Lincoln rose to greatness because he did not succumb to social pressure, and he never returned hatred for hatred.

It all comes down to a simple fact: you and I must practice what the Bible preaches. It is our duty if we take the Gospel of Jesus Christ seriously to do this. And I think if Lincoln were alive today, he would be happy to see those who without fanfare or fame - modestly and honestly - do the best they can wherever they happen to be in order to forward the cause of all that is noble and good in the name of humanity, in the name of justice, in the name of God.

RACE RELATIONS SUNDAY Today is celebrated as race relations Sunday. You ask what can you and I do to help share the burden of the disadvantaged population, the disenfranchised, the disheartened, the hurt and the helpless. You can begin by searching your own heart here this morning. You can

ask yourself what you can do to practice what God is teaching us through His word. You can affirm that all men are "stamped with the Divine image". You can turn again to the Sermon on the Mount and reaffirm the Golden Rule as the basis for your action: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them". And remember that Lincoln never cared what the aristocracy of the East said about him, that he was never concerned with the hostile criticism of the press in the Middle West, that he never worried about what his Springfield neighbors had to say. He was concerned with what was right in the sight of God. He would rather be right with God and fail in his mission than wrong with God and succeed. And it was no coincidence that he should crown his greatest speech (The Second Inaugural which the London Times hailed as the most sublime paper of the 19th Century) with this verse from the Old Testament: "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether". And if we pray to a just God then we must be willing to hear the answer to our prayer which may disturb our comfortable way of life and call on us to make sacrifices.

Will it be easy? No. Will it be a sure road to popularity in the community? No. Will it bring security and prosperity? No. Will it cost something? Yes. Will it ultimately help? Yes.

CLOSING Sidney Lanier, the American poet who perhaps more than any other represents the tragic period after the Civil War, tried to find some basis for re-establishing a way of life. He lived through near-starvation, privation and disease during the Reconstruction. He came to the realization that the God of Love was revealed in strange and wonderful ways. In his great poem, "The Marshes of Glyn", he captures the spirit of what I would like to leave you with today. As you go out of this place and try to practice what has been preached here, you will need a great deal of strength and encouragement. Lanier looked at the marsh close by to regain his perspective and to renew his understanding of God. Hear his words:

"As the marsh hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold, I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh hen flies
In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt the marsh and the skies:
By so many roots as the marsh grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me a hold on the greatness of God:
Oh, like the greatness of God is the greatness within
The range of the marshes, the liberal marshes of Glyn"

Lay hold on the greatness of God. All other things will then fall into perspective. You will be guided by the same God that guided Lincoln throughout his life. And in all you do and say you will carry forward what he began to do in his lifetime.

PRAYER We thank Thee, O God, for all ~~great~~ men who in days of darkness and crisis rise to greatness and who, under thy guiding hand are able to lift the level of life around them. And now, O God, help us to lay hold on thy greatness that the spirit of courage that was in thy servant Abraham Lincoln may also be found in us. In the spirit of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen