

National Treasure

July 3, 2011

Whitefish United Methodist Church

Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:25-30

- ✦ Here's a little American history quiz for you on the day before Independence Day: when did the United States of America become a nation? When did we cease to be a collection of states and a loosely tied together group of citizens and become a whole, a nation?
- ✦ Of course it's a trick question, or I wouldn't ask it! Here's a hint. The word "nation" never appears in the Declaration of Independence. When it was discussed, all references to "nation" were dropped in the final draft, and the only references were of the thirteen separate states.
- ✦ Daniel Boorstin, the historian, says what the Declaration of Independence created was not one nation but thirteen separate nations. And later in the writing of the constitution of our country, the words "national" or "nation" never appear.
- ✦ We created a national government, but it was more a community of states than a country with a sense of national identity and loyalty. After the adoption of the Constitution, there were rumblings for the next sixty or seventy years about whether the individual states had the right to overturn acts of Congress and even to secede from the union of states. When writers talked of the United States they said: "the United States are" instead of "the United States is."
- ✦ It all came to a head when the southern states did secede from the union. It's an oversimplification to say that they seceded over what

- John Wesley called in the late 18th century “the sum of all villainies”—the owning of some persons by other persons as slaves.
- ✦ And yet for the complex mix of factors influencing the Civil War, one thing is crystal clear—it was a horrible time of violence, suffering, and division for people on all sides.
 - ✦ One historian, Jay Winik, in his best selling book “April 1865” says that it was not until the end of the Civil War that we finally decided we were a nation, that we were more than just a confederation of states.
 - ✦ The war that took more American lives than any other in American history also became an occasion for us to bridge some of the chasms that divided our country and to become more united—a nation, under God, devoted to liberty and justice for all.
 - ✦ How is that possible, after a war that divided families and nearly destroyed our country? How is it possible, when religious leaders of both sides piously declared that God was on THEIR side, and not on the other’s?
 - ✦ In the Civil War, and in other wars and in our time, humanity displays both its highest nobility and its basest depravity. The Apostle Paul speaks to humanity’s capacity for both in his letter to Romans that we read today. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”
 - ✦ Yes, war brings out the best and the worst in us. But it doesn’t take war to do that, does it? It just takes life.
 - ✦ In my own life, in just this past wonderful week at Vacation Bible School, I found myself acting with grace and acceptance one moment

and five minutes later making a critical, judgmental comment that I shouldn't have. Does that ever happen to you?

- ✦ Now why is that? The simple answer is this: we are created for love, in the image of the God who is love itself. Yet the wounds from our family, our past, our circumstances keep us from loving as we are meant to love—with compassion, forgiveness, and grace.
- ✦ And the same is true for us as a nation, too. For even though we espouse the highest values of liberty and justice for all, it doesn't work out that way. Greed and the wounds of the past get in the way. These are trying times in our country's history as well. As the deadline for raising our national debt ceiling looms, all sides are trying to make points against the other, instead of making good decisions. The other morning, a distinguished commentator from Time Magazine called the President a four-letter word on "Morning Joe."
- ✦ If you watch the video, you can see the commentator realize what he has just done and anticipate his career disintegrating in front of his eyes. (The network has suspended him—who knows for how long.)
- ✦ But it doesn't have to be like that. We can rise above our destructive habits and desire to be right all the time and for everyone to know it. But it only happens if we open ourselves to God's transforming spirit.
- ✦ Let's get back to the spring of 1865. Many historians hold that it is one of the most pivotal times in our national story. The war was nearly over. The Union armies were finally prevailing, and the end was in sight. President Lincoln was about to deliver his second inaugural address.

- ✦ In spite of the rains and oceans of mud, Washington was in a celebrative mood, and also a vengeful mood. People in the inauguration crowds that day wore medals and ribbons with words such as “No Compromise with Armed Rebels,” and “A Foe to Traitors.”
- ✦ The year before, there had been a massacre of 300 Union troops, most of them African Americans, at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. Lincoln was besieged with calls for retribution. Northerners were demanding the execution of an equal number of Confederate prisoners.
- ✦ The crowd gathered to hear their victorious president expected a speech reflecting his triumph, revenge, or at the very least, satisfaction. Instead, Abraham Lincoln, in a speech of only 700 words was to ask them to think carefully about a vision of the nation after the war.
- ✦ He asked the people of the North, and of the South, the victor and the vanquished, to think about the mystery that “both read the same Bible and pray to the same God: and each invokes His aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.”
- ✦ What an amazing statement. Politicians constantly invoke God’s blessing on their own cause. Reinhold Niebuhr said that Lincoln was a better theologian than the religious leaders of his day (and ours!).
- ✦ Lincoln struggled a lot with theological issues, God’s role, God’s activity in the world. And his religious vision for the new nation that would have to be created after the war included a theology of a God who transcended partisan causes, transcended even nations, a God

who is God of all nations, a God who created and loves and works for the peace and salvation of all people.

- ✦ So instead of retribution, Lincoln asked for compassion, based on an inclusive, unifying vision for the whole nation. Standing on the steps of the Capitol, March 4, 1865, Lincoln said: *With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, his orphan.*
- ✦ Instead of vindictiveness, revenge, and triumphalism, Lincoln challenged all Americans to live up to a greater, larger, and better vision—a “just and lasting peace, among ourselves and with all nations.”
- ✦ Forty-one days later, Lincoln was assassinated. Lincoln's second inaugural is known as his “last will and testament to America.”
- ✦ That could have been the end of the great vision. It might have died along with Lincoln, and in the abuses of Reconstruction it almost did.
- ✦ With Lincoln's leadership a memory, let's return to the Spring of 1865. Part of what made this such a significant time in the forming of our nation can be attributed to Lincoln's foe in the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee.
- ✦ In April, Lee consciously decided to discourage his troops against continuing a guerrilla war against the Union troops, hiding in the woods and conducting a campaign of harassment. He believed that would not contribute to the common good of the country, and that it would prevent the healing that now needed to take place.

- ✦ How is this nobility possible? And more importantly, can it be repeated in the lives of our national and world leaders, and in us?
- ✦ Here's where Paul, and before him Jesus, come in. For both of them model for us the kind of leadership and character that is not principally about the greatness of themselves. On the contrary. It's all about their emptying themselves of desire for power for its own sake or for themselves.
- ✦ Can we do that on our own? Not very easily. For just when we think we've got it right, those old wounds kick in—whether in our own personal history, or that of our nation.
- ✦ Paul concludes after his confession of his own weakness and sinfulness, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” For it is only through his grace that God's highest values can be lived out, that we can be the selves God created us to be—love and forgiveness and compassion our defining values.
- ✦ Lincoln and Lee knew this, too, even though they were flawed and tormented human beings.
- ✦ Yet they put aside their basest instincts by becoming servants of a greater good. And they and our country became better for it. They put aside a God who was only on their side for one who would heal and free all sides.
- ✦ As this Independence Day approaches, you'll hear lots of speeches and reflections on who and where we are as a nation. This year, remember Lincoln and Lee and their self-emptying compassion, modeled on Jesus himself.
- ✦ For our nation is in need of their vision, their model of servant leadership.

- ⌘ And as citizens of our great nation, we need to model it, too.
- ⌘ Yes, I know it's not easy. But remember Jesus' words in the gospel lesson for today. They are often used to invite us into communion with God and with each other.
- ⌘ Think of a yoke. If you've ever read National Geographic, there are two kinds, you know. Single ones and shared ones. The single ones are very efficient. By placing a yoke across the shoulders and fitting buckets hung from poles on each side, human beings can carry almost as much as donkeys. They will tire easily and hurt their backs, but they can make some progress.
- ⌘ But a shared yoke works differently. If the creatures pulling it are well-matched, they can work all day, because one can rest a little while the other pulls. Plenty of us labor under the illusion that our yokes are single ones, that we have to go it alone.
- ⌘ But all the time Jesus is standing in front of us, half of a shared yoke across his own shoulders, the other half wide open and waiting for us, a yoke that requires no more than that we step into it and become part of a team.
- ⌘ And if you don't think it's possible, let me tell you one last story. I have told it to you before, but it bears repeating. It was a warm morning in May of 1865 in Richmond, Virginia. The scene is Sunday morning at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, congregation of many of the city's wealthy southern aristocrats now trying to deal with what it means to have lost the war and be welcomed back into the United States of America.

- ✦ In the congregation is a distinguished older man who has spent his last four years in the war. His hair is white, his shoulders are rounded now. He attracts the attention of many worshippers.
- ✦ But another worshipper is attracting attention as well. As the priest is about to serve communion, a tall, well-dressed black man seated in the western gallery of the church, the area reserved for blacks, unexpectedly comes forward to the communion rail.
- ✦ Usually whites received communion first, then blacks. The congregation froze. The minister himself was unsure of what to do. Historian Winik writes: “It was one thing for the south to endure defeat and poverty or to accept the fact that blacks were now free. It was quite another for a black man to stride up to the front of the church as though an equal. And not just any church, but here, at the sanctuary for Richmond’s elite, the wealthy, the well-bred, the high cultured.”
- ✦ The people tensed in their pews. Then the white-haired veteran arose, “his gait erect, his head up and eyes proud, and he walked quietly up the aisle to the chancel rail. He looked far older than most people remembered from when the war had just begun...yet these Richmonders still looked to him for a sense of purpose and guidance.”
- ✦ So as General Robert E. Lee knelt down along the same rail as the black man to take communion, “the other communicants followed in his path, going forward to the altar, and with a mixture of reluctance and fear, hope and awkward expectation, into the future.”
- ✦ Today we come to communion, too. To ask God to empty us of the things that hold us from becoming who God wants us to be—as

individuals and as a nation. The shared yoke is waiting for us, with Jesus taking the heavier part.

- ✦ “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
- ✦ For we remember, that on the night....