

Lincoln

Leviticus. 19: 13-16

John 4: 1-14

June 30, 2013 (6th Sunday after Pentecost)

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I. Introduction

Last week we began a new sermon series looking at some of the theological themes in the Oscar-nominated films of this past year. We began that series looking at *Les Misérables* and the film that just came out of that, and many of you know that that was one of my favorite books and my very favorite musical. It was also a very favorite book to soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. It was being written just about that time, and it was coming out in installments, and the soldiers used to pass around the latest installment in the camps, both sides interestingly identifying with it. The Confederate soldiers sometimes jokingly referred to themselves as Lee's Misérables, and so there's this wonderful, kind of, connection with the book, which felt like maybe a good opportunity for us to move from *Les Mis* to looking at the wonderful film about Abraham Lincoln that came out this past year by Steven Spielberg.

Lincoln the movie is the story of the passage of the 13th Amendment, the amendment to our constitution that abolished slavery and all of political machinations that made that event happen. It is in part based on the book *Team of Rivals* written by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin and starred Daniel Day-Lewis in an amazing portrayal of Abraham Lincoln. If you haven't had a chance to see it, he just embodies that character, and it's quite remarkable to watch.

There was for me an awkward moment in the latter part of the movie as they're getting close to the vote and they're two votes short of having enough to pass the House, and Lincoln's cabinet is debating about what to do and a lot of them arguing essentially, we need to put this thing on hold for a little bit, in the face of Lincoln's very strong conviction that this was the moment that this could happen and we could get it passed. And you can kind of watch Lincoln getting more and more discouraged at the wrangling of the people in his cabinet, and he finally slams his hand down on the desk and he says to them, "I am the President of United States of America, clothed in immense power. You will procure me those votes."

II. Power

It was an awkward moment, for me anyway, in part because it seemed very out of place with the very humble, self-effacing, folksy style that Lincoln had through much of the rest of the movie. But as I reflected on it, it also occurred to me that part of my discomfort was the result of a very tortured relationship that we as Christians often have with the mechanisms of power and people using those in explicit ways. We are mindful of Lord Acton's advice that, "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And as Christians we often fall into the role of being professional nice people, right, and so, we don't want to roll over somebody who may have a different opinion than we do, and therefore, we check some of our own expressions of power. As intelligent and logical people, we often feel as though the better argument should win the day, the smarter policy should be the decision that gets made and that should be obvious. And yet, we know practically, particularly living in Washington, D.C., that that is, more often than not, not the case and that selfishness and fear often win the

debate, or apathy and intransigence keep us from moving forward in working towards God's justice.

I spent many years in my non-profit life as part of a number of advocacy groups, national and local, advocating more just policies and budgets for our city and our nation, and that was often a very frustrating process because very little seemed to get accomplished, and in part I think because we didn't have a good appreciation of how to use power. We just assumed that if we had the morally right argument, people should fall into line. And you know what? Not so much.

It wasn't until I actually got here to Metropolitan and started working with our group from the Washington Interfaith Network, WIN, that I started to develop an appreciation for how we form coalitions that build and use political power effectively, and how important that was for us to fulfill our call, as we heard in Leviticus, to build a society of justice. We don't wrestle with this a great deal at Metropolitan, but there are certainly whole swaths of Christianity that will argue that the church shouldn't be involved in politics. And while I don't think we suffer from that particularly here, I want to be very explicit in saying that our call, as we heard it in Leviticus and throughout the scriptures, has very clearly got political ramifications and that the ministry of Jesus had very profound political ramifications. So, when you have Jesus initiating His ministry by calling for the release of captives and the redistribution of land, which was what the Jubilee was about, that has very political implications. And it is not accidental that Jesus was not executed by the religious leaders of his day for being a heretic, which they had the perfect right to do. He was killed by the political leaders of his day because of the fear of the political ramifications of his vision for the world.

Our call as Christians is a profoundly political one, and it's one that we do some good work on here at Metropolitan, but I think it's a place where we have some room to be strengthened. We have got some very powerful and compelling ministries of social justice in our church that I'm very proud of and very grateful for in terms of our shelters and our hunger ministries and all of that really wonderful hands-on work that we do. But that's not enough. We are not simply called to serve people who are in need. We are called to address the structures that keep people in need. And that's the work of advocacy, that's the work of our Washington Interfaith Network that we are a part of, where we can collect together, and with churches from across the city advocate for a more just system for our city. And while we've got a great team of people who are involved in that, I think we could bring a little bit more intentionality to that process. I'll come back to that in just a minute.

III. Power lessons from Lincoln

I want to flesh out a couple of the, I think, very helpful messages that the movie *Lincoln* had about how we engage in that process. The first thing that I think is worth noting is that the political process is quite messy and often rather unseemly. Amen? It was interesting to me as I read a number of the critiques of this movie, particularly by Christian writers, that they were uncomfortable with the way that Abraham Lincoln played the political system to get the 13th Amendment passed. There was a great deal of discomfort with Lincoln's essentially offering jobs to Democrats for their votes, in exchange for their votes. There was a lot of discomfort with his misleading people about where the peace negotiations were. There was a lot of discomfort with what felt

like some underhanded political game on the part of this man that we all revere as a paragon of virtue.

But I think that the whole point of the movie was that Lincoln knew what had to happen and figured out how to get there in some ways that weren't always aboveboard, but were getting to the goal that had to happen.

There is a really wonderful scene in which he is arguing with Thaddeus Stevens who was a very radical proponent of abolition in his own party, in the Republican Party, and in this scene Stevens is railing at the loss of our moral compass as a nation as the result of slavery, and arguing with Mr. Lincoln to compromise in any way is going to play into that loss of moral compass. And Lincoln responds to him in this movie, "A compass," he says, "I learned when I was surveying -- it'll point you true north from where you're standing, but it's got no advice about the swamps, deserts, and canyons that you'll encounter on the way. If, in pursuit of your destination, you plunge ahead heedless of the obstacles and achieve nothing more than to sink in a swamp, what's the use of knowing true north?"

It sometimes feels to me as though we in the church are really good at defining what true north might look like, but sometimes don't pay attention to the swamps and ravines along the way. And the political process is messy. It requires strategic thinking, it requires strategic partnering to move our agenda forward.

Which takes me to the next point. Part of the strategic partnering is building sometimes unconventional coalitions of people around a particular goal.

Lincoln, after winning the presidency, made some unprecedented decisions in terms of how he formed his cabinet, and he formed his cabinet in large part from the people who were his opponents in the election, people who didn't like him very much, people who disagreed with him and disagreed with one another pretty violently sometimes. This whole motif of the team of rivals is the power in pulling together disparate voices in achieving some common goals.

Doris Kearns Goodwin notes that every member of Lincoln's administration was better known, better educated, and more experienced in public life than Lincoln was, and he built them into a team of remarkable effectiveness. It takes an enormous amount of self-confidence and self-awareness to invite into your cabinet people who are more educated, better known, and more experienced than you, and Lincoln understood the importance of building that kind of diverse team to move his agenda forward.

Jesus, of course, did exactly the same thing. When you look at Jesus' disciples you see a remarkably diverse group of voices, all the way from Simon the Zealot who was in favor of violently overthrowing the rule of the Romans, to Levi who was perfectly delighted to collaborate with them. If Simon had met Levi on the road, chances are not bad that he would have tried to kill him, literally. That was what the Zealots did. And yet, Jesus pulls these folks into a community of such power that the entire world is transformed.

In this wonderful passage from John that we heard this morning, Jesus is in a Samaritan city. Samaritans and Jews don't like each other. Men and women in that

society weren't supposed to talk to each other, and Jesus engages this Samaritan woman with whom he has almost nothing in common. And not just engages her in teaching. He engages her and she pushes back on him, because that's what happens when people of differing opinions get together, you push each other. And Jesus says, "You know, I can offer you living water." And she says, "You don't even have a bucket. What are you offering me?" You know, I like that. And Jesus encourages that kind of response. Jesus likes to be pushed back on. And out of that dialogue, she starts to see some different possibilities. And she goes back to her town and she says, "You know what, this is going to sound wacky, but I think I might've just met the Messiah."

If you've never been to a WIN action, you will be stunned and delighted by the incredible diversity of people that come together for an event like that. People who on a whole range of issues may be in very strong disagreement but have come together around the issues that we agree on to move an agenda forward, and over the years, that work and the pressure that WIN has brought on to our political system have resulted in millions and millions of dollars being poured into projects that are core to who we are as Christians, and in particular, the building of affordable and supportive housing.

None of that work happens quickly or easily. And that's the third piece that I think is captured wonderfully in this movie about Lincoln, is it's long, hard work and requires from us a great doggedness, a great degree of patience, a great degree of an ability to look far down the road at what the goals might be.

I love this quote that was found by Lincoln about the Divine Will. “It is quite possible,” he says, “that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party, and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are the best adaptation to effect His purpose.” In other words, God’s goal may be different than any agenda we bring to the table and most likely is, but there’s something about the process of engaging with one another in a healthy, full-bodied way that allows God’s work to unfold. We are called to engage in the debate with all the energy and integrity and passion we can bring over a long period of time.

I think that we’ve got a good possibility at this point in putting enough pressure on the city to get those 266 units of housing at Parkway Overlook redeveloped. Yes, I think it’s exciting. But you know what? That’s just 266 units. We’ve got a lot of work and a lot of need. And it’s not going to happen today, it’s not going to happen next week or next year. It’s going to happen because God’s will will get worked out over the long course of our history. And we’ve got to be in there for every piece of that struggle. Amen?

IV. Conclusion

Whenever I get uncomfortable in movies or books about quotes, I look them up, I do research. And I looked up this reference that made me uncomfortable in the movie, only to find that it actually likely was an actual quote from Abraham Lincoln. A congressman named James Alley was writing about the passage of the 13th Amendment 23 years after it had been enacted, and he recalls the conversation he had with Lincoln in which Lincoln said, “I leave it to you to determine how it shall be

done, but remember that I am President of the United States, clothed with great power, and I expect you to procure those votes.” It still doesn’t feel like the picture of Lincoln I have in my head, but maybe I need to change my picture a little bit and start to appreciate a man who understood the use of power to get an agenda accomplished.

And I want to encourage us as we move forward as a Metropolitan community to claim a little bit of that as well. It’s profoundly important to do the hands-on stuff. And again, I am so grateful to our community for the many ways in which we do that. But I want to encourage us to bring the same kind of commitment to looking at the structural justice issues. That’s where the real change will happen ultimately. And I want to encourage you to join us this afternoon at Brighter Day at three o’clock, bus leaving at two. But if you can’t do today, I want you to find ways of participating in the work that we do through the Washington Interfaith Network. We’ve got the skills and the people in this church community to make a tremendous difference, and we need to be doing that. That’s who God has called us to be and gifted us to be. God’s kingdom of justice will be accomplished because God is God, but God has invited us to be a part of that and take a hold of that call so that we can be the people God has called us to be.

Amen.