

From the Rector; Monday, January 5, 2009
Reflection

We hear and read a lot these days about the power of innovation. Thomas Friedman's columns regularly encourage U.S. leaders in the private and public sectors alike to establish policies that reward the creation of more efficient and environmentally friendly products and services. Through innovation, Friedman and others believe, the U.S. can maintain its geo-political preeminence. Without it, we can't.

Lincoln believed this too. In an address entitled "Discoveries and Inventions", he extols the virtues of economic and political liberty. He argues that they make possible the kind of innovative enterprise that would keep the U.S. competitive in "transatlantic markets" (an earlier version of globalization).

Of special interest to us, though, is the way Lincoln ties market-oriented creativity to reinventing the self. The "fuel of (economic) interest" which drives the marketplace, he wrote, sparks "the fire of genius", which can "break (oppression's) shackle" and "immancipate (Lincoln's spelling) the mind". We'll talk more about this on Sunday, in the second session of our Adult Forum series "Lincoln's Religion", and examine how others - the author of Psalm 90, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Frederick Douglass - view the capacity for creative enterprise, the re-creation of the self, which Lincoln held in such high esteem.

From the Rector; Thursday, January 15, 2009
Reflection

With only a few exceptions (his children, possibly a few fellow lawyers), Lincoln loved at a distance. From the time he entered public life, he had an agenda for just about every conversation and every encounter. He saw clearly where people fit into a larger picture, and deployed them, with or without their knowledge and consent, to achieve his goals.

Yet we don't remember Lincoln as a master manipulator. We think of him as "Father Abraham", kind, tenderhearted. "With malice toward none, with charity for all" captures his legacy.

A favorite professor of mine used to say, "If the end doesn't justify the means, what does?" We cut some people a lot of slack, because we believe their heart is in the right place. Even if they use us, we don't doubt their love for us. We might even be glad to play a part in a performance they're orchestrating. Lincoln's colleagues, looking back, felt this way about him. Being loved at a distance by Lincoln seemed superior to just about any other love they'd known.

From the Rector; Thursday, January 22, 2009
Reflection

The young Abraham Lincoln clung to a rigid, prickly sense of honor, and it got in his way sometimes. In last Sunday's discussion of "Lincoln's Religion", we noted his insensitivity in romance. Unswervingly loyal to principles, he neglected small courtesies that women might have appreciated, felt slighted readily and often, and stayed with bad decisions to prove his steadfastness.

This Sunday we'll listen to the voices of some other 19th-century Americans: the slave Nat Turner, leader of a bloody revolt that terrified Virginia in 1838; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, author of the women's rights manifesto "A Declaration of Sentiments", promulgated at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848; and Frederick Douglass, born in bondage, who secured his own freedom and became a noted writer, lecturer and abolitionist. Dishonored in various ways by their communities and their country, they sought to define honor on their own terms.

Lincoln seems never to have appreciated the women's aspirations represented so powerfully by Stanton and the Seneca Falls gathering. Maybe his own awkwardness in romance made this impossible. But he certainly came to recognize the dignity of Frederick Douglass and even Nat Turner, and to see parallels between their efforts to define honor, and his. These days, few things seem more important than understanding other people's sense of honor. Across the world, the nation and the household, we get closer to peace if we know what other human beings need to do in order to hold their heads high. Lincoln helped show us the way.

From the Rector; Thursday, January 29, 2009

Reflection

Abraham Lincoln, like all of us, struggled to understand who his real enemies were. Early in his career, he used his wit to skewer political opponents. Later, he set his sights on what he called the "slave power". By "slave power", he sometimes meant a conspiracy of slaveowners and their representatives and supporters; in other contexts, he clearly pointed to a principle - that it is acceptable for one person to hold another in bondage - as the real threat to his ideals, and the nation's.

The Letter to the Ephesians tells us that we are not contending against flesh and blood enemies, but against the powers of darkness themselves. Lincoln seems to have come to this recognition, so difficult for most of us to attain. Having done so, he was able to love his flesh and blood enemies - rebels, slaveowners, members of Congress. He may even have felt gratitude for them. Through their opposition to Lincoln's aims, the principles contending for the soul of the young republic came into sharp relief.

Lincoln knew what he was fighting to destroy, and what he was fighting to sustain. He counseled only charity for the nation's people, all of them, including those who had rebelled against its government. The war he led had destroyed the principle that guided their rebellion, and that's all that counted for Lincoln. The real enemy lay vanquished. Because this was true, Lincoln harbored no ill will toward the flesh and blood agents who had fought on its behalf.