

Reflections, March 2009

Thursday, March 26, 2009

My mom never trusted people readily, and she became even warier after my father died. (This frustrated me for a long time. I wanted her to be more “open,” which usually meant giving me more leeway.)

My grandmother, unlike my mom, generally had a “live and let live” attitude. Still, she trusted only grudgingly and expected little. In this, mother and daughter resembled each other a great deal. My grandmother was stunned when her first Social Security check arrived. She had undoubtedly heard about the program, but probably didn’t trust the government to honor its commitments.

Somewhere along the line, many of us stopped paying attention to things we should have been watching like hawks. We trusted that the people handling our money—and other valuable resources, too—had our best interests at heart and knew what they were doing. In many cases, we were wrong. Even the sharpest critics of President Reagan admit the wisdom of “Trust, but verify.”

The Book of Proverbs tells us to let our trusted advisers be few. Jesus relates a parable about a treasure hidden in a field, which would compel anyone who found it to sell all they had and buy the field. The treasure might be a person we can trust. Perhaps God is using these troubled times to teach us anew the value, and rarity, of such a person. I still wish my mom had trusted me a little more. But I appreciate her wariness now in a way I didn’t before.

Thursday, March 19

The greatest performers make everything new seem old, and everything old seem new.

Donal Leace, supported by his musical partner Doug Rainoff, did this for a grateful audience at St. Mary’s, Foggy Bottom on St. Patrick’s Day evening. Old songs sounded like they were composed yesterday, with today in mind. Hip-hop superstar Kanyé West apparently hears them this way too. We found out that West has “sampled” from Leace’s catalogue, incorporating snippets into his own hit records. New is old, and old new.

Part of our job as Christians—or maybe just as human beings—is to make old values new, to apply perennial teachings to new realities. Current circumstances bring this challenge into high relief. Paradoxically, they also make it a little easier to meet. Integrity, honesty, playing by the rules, humility, discipline: do any of these values sound “old-fashioned” now? To most of us they never did, but they’ve certainly acquired new power and immediacy. Without a revival of these values our way of life might crumble. Painfully, but for the purposes of redemption, God has made old things new again.

Thursday, March 12, 2009

Last in a series on Abraham Lincoln The Confederacy claimed to be fighting the Civil War to defend its deeply-held principles. Southerners believed in a hierarchical society. Lincoln, under extreme pressure to demonize the South, refused to do so, and took the South at its word. He understood his adversary to be engaged in a brave struggle on behalf of an idea which it embraced in good faith, but with which he utterly disagreed.

We sometimes lack Lincoln's integrity. We don't take people at their word. We attribute hidden motives and secret agendas to people when we don't agree with them. This subtle form of demonization undermines our relationships, makes us wary of each other.

Do people sometimes have hidden and nefarious motives? Of course they do. Did the South's devotion to hierarchy mask a hidden agenda to protect the indefensible domination of one race by another? Undoubtedly. But Lincoln took on the South on the basis of their proclaimed beliefs, and left whatever was hidden for God to reveal, in God's own time and God's own way. Let us not judge, he told the nation as the bloody struggle drew to a close, that we ourselves may not be judged.

Thursday, March 4, 2009

After the Battle of Gettysburg, Union General George Meade failed to pursue and destroy Lee's decimated Army of Northern Virginia. Had he done so, the war might have ended in July of 1863, or at least much earlier than it did.

President Lincoln was infuriated with Meade. He wrote him a letter telling him so, but never sent it.

Didn't Meade deserve to get that letter? Didn't he have it coming? Wasn't Lincoln's indignation entirely righteous?

We all know, or know of, people who deserve a dose of righteous indignation. In some cases, they might even straighten up if somebody gave it to them. Maybe Meade would have become a more aggressive general if he'd gotten the President's letter. Or maybe the next encounter would require caution, and Meade, fearing the wrath of the Commander-in-Chief, would take an ill-considered risk with the lives of his men and the cause of his nation. Or maybe the President's rebuke would cause him to fall into a funk and lose his focus. These thoughts, and others, probably caused Lincoln to fold up the letter and put it in a desk drawer.

Psalm 37 counsels us to "refrain from anger" and "leave rage alone." Put the letter in the drawer. Save the e-mail as a draft. Lincoln had some things to say to Meade. A moment of hot anger wasn't the time to say them.