

ONE COUNTRY ONE DESTINY

Text on Sunday, February 13, 2011

Genesis 35: 16-18, 22b-29; Luke 6:12-19

We spoke here last Sunday morning of a priority within the two great commandments. With all my heart, I hold to what I meant to say, but I would not be the first to say—indeed, one of you said it at the door from this nave last week—that such a position can be overstated, and mislead. That is true. Through my years in the pulpit, it has often struck me that, since handling truth has always the character of touching poles of a globe—now souths, now norths; now lefts, now rights—I must often unsay today some of what was said last week, in order to be faithful. And for the same reason, you must come every week, else leave with half-truths.

A moment ago, we heard from Genesis a passage which for the continuous reader feels like a season finale to a cliff hanger. *Who shot J.R.?* had no edge on this family drama. Unfaithful cowardice, murderous hate between brothers, cheating and lying, barren wombs and drought and famine and a father asked to kill his own boy! Will this family ever make it? But in Genesis 35, the census is told: “The sons of Jacob were twelve.” Breathe!

My study of history and anthropology and the Bible does not settle for me the question, whether there was a man named Jacob who fathered twelve sons who became each in turn father to a tribe secured within certain domains all contiguous and all honoring one God. I don’t know. Much tells against that simple tale, and heavy sands are blown across the pages of time. But of this we can be certain. In time, twelve tribes came to tell one story of their great fathers and mothers. In time, twelve tribes came by one name to praise and to fear God. Therefore, the telling of that one story is the irreducible fact with which we have to do. That telling—the willingness, the hope, the need to be bound together telling of God with one name only through one story—this is the mortar with which the Lord builds the house.

The fundamental message in Israel’s narrative is unity. A lot of gods’ names appear in the Old Testament—Ashtoreth and Baal, Milcom and Marduk and many more—yet no tribe on earth now knows those names. Only Israel’s God survives. Better said, only Israel’s story of unity—how the many relate to the One—was able to guard and guide a people through all storms of time. The unities Genesis insists on are three: the unity of God in Godself, revealed not deduced; the possibility of unity within the human soul—that is, integrity in spite of grievous errors past; and the possibility of unity among many souls—that is, the possibility of justice and of love. These three are the Bible’s continual song: unity within our person, unity of many people, and the perception of the divine, eternal unity; all given by one Source. None is good alone. Let one atrophy; make one overmaster the others; and the whole falls into disorder, leaving only slogans for demagogues.

The inner meaning of the stories of strife and betrayal in Genesis is that you, too, O children of Abraham, who are many and divided, with the help of one God can come to yourself; can become master of your many inner selves and your (twelve?) incompatible desires; can see that the other whom you hate, whom you fear—whether one or many—whom you stab with your tongue in unruly passion—they are your brother, your sister. Now, it hardly matters to speechify about such things. It only matters when you feel a power for such things coursing new in you. For this, *these* stories were told and retold while a thousand others went up with the smoke of ancient fires.

But there is more in the saga of twelve. You know the tribes split into two nations, ten to the north, two to the south. And you know that after a time, first the north, then the south with its gleaming city Jerusalem and its temple were all brought to ruin by empires. The ten tribes were lost forever and Judah scattered. Yet even in exile, telling these stories kept alive the experience of unity as inner reality and eternal hope. And new songs they sang. In a reading of the Bible however intensive, you could never fully account for all the ways that psalmists and sages, prophets and priests and chroniclers of that seemingly shattered people called out to the One—Yahweh echad!—praying that the twelve might come home. Yes, the possibility that all be gathered was never forgotten; that the many might be one; that soul and society be made one in one God.

After hundreds of years of this liturgy of hope, when Jesus called his disciples and, as our reading this morning has it, chose from among them twelve to be apostles—that is, to be sent out—know that with that number twelve, Jesus was engaging in social and political theater of great urgency. He was declaring that the time for waiting was done; the twelve are home; the many are one; the acceptable year of the Lord has come. It is time for souls who are learning like Mary to master their inner division to be sent out to bless all the families of the earth. It is time for social service.

Now let us bring home the inner meaning of the twelve. For Americans, the number that symbolizes divine unity of the many is not twelve, but thirteen. Whenever the national anthem plays, however it registers in you, that original thirteen set in the stripes is being called upon as a symbol of the many holding to the One. And yet—you know this story well—despite their ethereal access to wisdom, framed in the Constitution of 1787, the original thirteen finally bound themselves together with the blood of Africans.

The recent public reading of our Constitution on the floor of the Congress, in principle a good thing to do, seemed to me in some measure tragic, for not a word was offered to us, an often ignorant people, to remind us that the original document contained a flaw so awesome the whole could never stand; for there, the black man and woman were measured out *in print* as $3/5$ human. Civil war must follow. Something short of four score and seven years later, the precious symbol “13” gave way to that number most prized by the devil—two; north and

south, divided. Though the unity of the thirteen had been “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” now came the question, “testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

Last Wednesday, an old coat which had not been seen for a few years was again displayed at a theater in Washington, D.C. The coat was Abraham Lincoln’s, the theater Ford’s, and the new display timed for the 202nd anniversary of Lincoln’s birth, just yesterday. When in 2007 this coat had been removed from Ford’s Theatre by Smithsonian curators, its lining was examined and revealed an emblem whose existence had fallen from living memory. Lincoln had had the coat made for his second inaugural address, delivered just forty days before his death. Imagine the curator’s astonishment to see embroidered in black thread on black silk the American eagle, taloned with arrows and olive branches over the words: *One Country One Destiny*.

Now we might think the advantages of national unity plain enough: defense, sound borders, commerce, prosperity. Why, the books of the kings say that desire for those very advantages prompted the leaders of the twelve tribes to ask Samuel to anoint one king over them all. But a deeper reading of the meaning of a nation’s unity has come down to us through Socrates and Plato, through our Bible, and also through our founders. Here is but a fragment on this subject from George Washington’s farewell address:

It is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness . . . frowning indignantly upon the first dawning of any attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.

Just as inward liberty requires a right and balanced relationship among all the parts of your self—that gift of integrity—so outward liberty likewise depends upon a right and balanced relationship among all the parts—the gift of “liberty and justice for all.” More than we can know from a high school study of history, our forebears ancient and near have understood and so lived that the unity of the nation might provide that free space in which the soul may describe an upward arc toward unity in God; and that truth-seeking souls may make wide and wider still the walls of the city wherein justice and love rule together. The relationship of the unity of the nation to the integrity of personhood is absolute. Of course tyranny does not suppress all saints, but national disunion does suppress the development of most people. Those four words sewn in the coat of the man who would be killed that the evils of slavery and disunion might end can be for us a living word from God with regard to our destiny. This can only become so, however, if enough of us leave off thinking of our destiny as manifest in uniqueness and exceptionalism; and choose the way of relinquishment, the way of remorse, that will enable us to see with divinely doubled vision both the extraordinary strength and passion of our one country with its many people, and our titanic evils, unleashed upon tens of millions of human beings, demeaning our

destiny.

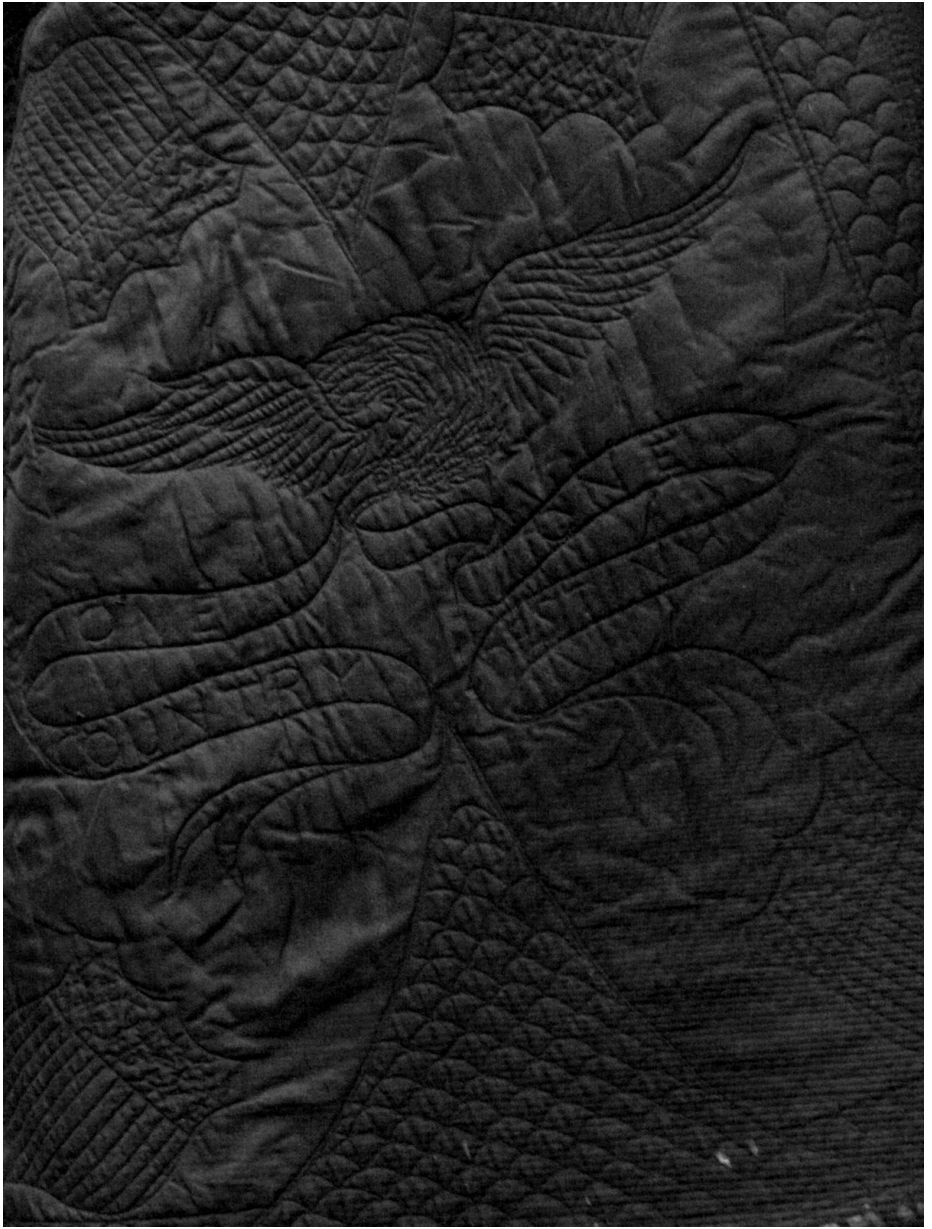
Yet in Frederick Douglass' words, there is "a tight network of self-deception that prevents America from being shocked by itself." We know this network only too well. Its voice is constantly in our ears. Yet I think there is no way forward for us without coming to ourselves, rising from the sleep of conscience in which our nation is so dazed. The path of remorse is the only path of genuine unity for a nation. The path of remorse is not like guilt, which makes nerves dull and binds all members in helplessness. The path of remorse is the path of seeing what we have been without undue passion, and therefore with greater clarity and heightened hope for what we shall be. Our remorse for the enslavement of millions, for the century of silence that followed, for the destruction of communities and institutions, for indifference to reparation, would be, frankly, a kind of soul service—a great inwardness practiced before a great action. We were called onto that path by Lincoln himself, wearing that great coat for his second inaugural address in 1865, when he asked us to see ourselves, North and South, united in sin before one God.

"If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come; but which, having continued through his appointed time he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came; shall we discern therein any departure from the divine attributes which those who believe in a living God always ascribe to him?"

Now, here in New York City, we are a particular church considering these great matters of past and future, of truth and justice, and of God. Here in our own midst, alas, that terrible two-ness of division has landed. If it division should pass solely because one party left these spaces, all would be poorer in such a peace. No! If we will hear the story of those twelve angry brothers from one father, and those twelve disciples from one son, we can stand together. I want to tell you something I am hearing from far and wide as friends wish me well in this pulpit. *America needs the Riverside Church*, they say. Do you not agree? America, asleep in conscience for the pain of its past, needs its great cities to wake to the call of their great churches, so few in number, whose people must rise in perfect unity to sound out the promise of a destiny wherein all kinds shall dwell in unity. If your heart stirs to this peculiar possibility in the arrangement of history, that you who are members of this body of Christ here and now are called to serve in a time such as this, then accept, O disciples, that the work before you is plain. Let Christ be your discipline. In soul service, inwardly master your unruly passions by the power of your Master's love. Be accountable one to another for love. Then, waiting not for perfection, but as apostles only, be ye reconciled one to another—do it now, do it today—and stand as one with sisters and brothers of all faiths ready to be sent out with a story to tell the nations.

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An image of the lining of Lincoln's overcoat,
prepared for the inaugural address of March 4, 1865.