

OUT OF BOUNDS

Texts on Sunday, February 11, 2007

Psalm 1; Luke 6: 17-31

Jesus went down with them and stood on a level place. And from there, he spoke the words from what we call “the sermon on the mount.” Did you notice that? How can we explain that? First, you need to know that the stories are in different gospels. Matthew says this is the sermon on the mount; Luke says it’s the sermon on the level. Who was right? One option would be that they’re both right; that he had a kind of a stump speech which he spoke five or seven or dozens of times, and we only have a record of a couple of them. But I don’t think that’s the story. I don’t think that either one of them is right in the sense of having a fact by the tail that he has grabbed. What we have here is a setting chosen by the author—Luke in this case, Matthew in the other—a setting for well-beloved and meaningful sayings of Jesus. Nobody remembered where they were spoken at all; that’s more like more like humans to have forgotten details like that and to remember the heart of the thing. Blessed are you who are hungry! Matthew is always putting his picture of Jesus up high. Luke is always bringing his image and his regard for Jesus down among the people. So we see again that Scripture does not give us facts about Jesus. It gives us already an interpretation of the transformation taking place inside of the authors, who are sharing that with you and me. Luke was changed because in Christ he saw that God had come down in Christ to stand with us on a level place.

Tomorrow is the birthday of Abraham Lincoln. This being also Black history month and your church’s birthday, which comes from that early nineteenth century period when our church was emerging from your side about 25 years later right in the heart of the thickening danger for America—there could hardly be a better occasion to think backward and forward about what it can mean that Jesus comes down to stand on a level place.

A little story came to my attention just recently. In March of 1850, William Seward, the former Governor of New York State and now the junior US Senator from this state was offering his maiden speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate. He offered a clarion call to bring slavery to an end in America—to set the captive free. The historian Doris Kearns Goodwin describes the speech in *Team of Rivals*.

As he moved into the second hour of his speech, his conviction gave him ease and confidence. Step by step, he laid the foundation for the . . . doctrine that would forever be associated with his name. Not only did the Constitution bind the American people to goals incompatible with slavery, he asserted, “but there is a higher law than the Constitution, which regulates our authority over the domain, and devotes it to the same noble purposes. The territory is a part . . . of the common heritage of mankind, bestowed upon them by the Creator of the universe. We are his stewards.” With this, his first national address, Seward became the principal anti-slavery voice in the Senate.¹

Another historian adds, “Those favoring compromise proposals [to keep slavery legal] rushed to attack Seward as a reckless enemy of the Constitution.”² One of his attackers was Rev. John C. Lord, first pastor of Central Church in Buffalo, New York. A little more than one year after Seward’s speech on the floor of the Senate, Lord delivered a sermon titled “The Higher Law.” There he took up the battle against Seward particularly and against all who would claim, contrary to the Fugitive Slave Law and its constitutional foundations, that obedience to a “higher law,” required that escaped slaves should *not* be returned to their owners in the south. Lord claimed that anyone who says there’s a higher law than our laws is mistaken; that religious faith must not be imported into the laws of the government—an interesting and powerful idea—and yet, he goes on to say, because Scripture forbids it. Lord abhorred the thought of sundering this nation on account of slavery, but he would not go against slavery if it would cause a sundering. He argued therefore for tolerating slavery. In his sermon of Thanksgiving Day sermon in 1851 he declared.

The existence of domestic Slavery was expressly allowed, sanctioned, and regulated by the Supreme Lawgiver in that divine economy which He gave the Hebrews . . . [Those who hold that] slavery is necessarily sinful now . . . must assume that [they] are wiser and better men than the Savior himself and the Apostles, and that the government of God and the Gospel need revision . . .

This is literalism with an iron grip on a bright man's mind, and that of millions of fellow Christians of his day. The gospel needs revision? Yes, the gospel needs revision. To revise is to review—it's the same word. To review is to re-see. To re-see is to say I have new sight. To have new sight is to say I once was blind, but now I see, just as John Newman said it in his great song "amazing grace." Is it not revision to experience grace? Lord would not see it.

Seward and Lord were enemies, politically speaking. Lord was a classic Old School Presbyterian. He believed that the fallen state of humanity was absolute. It tainted absolutely everything humans undertook. As a consequence, the spheres of public policy and private religion had to be absolutely separated. No way can sinful man work out the Kingdom of God on earth. Slavery is one of God's punishment for the evils of humanity. There is nothing to be done. And here is a switch: this was also the view of the Democratic Party of those days. Seward was a Whig. Whigs believed in using taxes to build up canals and roads; they believed in tariffs to help out with the building up of small industry and free labor. This was in line with the thinking of New School Presbyterians. Seward wasn't a Presbyterian. But New School Protestantism—coming from the city of New Haven where a man named Nathaniel Taylor had been teaching it—animated the people and leadership of this church, First Presbyterian Church. Central and First split over these kinds of issues: how do you interpret the meaning of the law of God, written in these words. The more literalist were the early Centralites, who left. And there was something new happening among the members of First, as well as Presbyterian churches all over central New York State.

In 1837 Central, having just called John Lord, sent their new pastor down to Pittsburgh, where the General Assembly mustered a majority of Old School Presbyterians to kick all those Central New York presbyteries right out of the church, because of the way that they began to experience a revising—a renewing—of the gospel. Scripture was standing in the way of freedom for the black man and the black woman. Or we should rephrase that: a specific way of interpreting scripture was standing in the way of freedom. Leaders like Rev. Lord loathed slavery, but they argued that nothing could be done against it. Leaders of New School Presbyterians, like First Church, like Seward, and a throng of abolitionists throughout the country, were called "radical Republicans." They argued that Christians had been reading their Good Book too narrowly, if they could suppose that it prohibits believers from committing their lives and their government to see that all people are created equal. No, they would argue, a Christian must be willing to go out of bounds with the gospel, lest she become a slave to merely human ways of thinking.

And yet neither Seward nor Lord nor radical nor conservative nor Democrat nor Republican—no one could carry the day and lead this nation forward. For that reason, a man was elected to preside over this nation who simply did not claim to know the will of God. Abraham Lincoln knew he was not first in the hearts of his countrymen. He was not first in the hearts of anyone at the Chicago convention of 1860. Indeed, Seward was generally expected to receive the vote of the convention. One hundred seventy of about 230 needed delegates were already supporting him as the convention began. But through intelligence, magnanimity, generosity, peace, patience—all the fruits of the Spirit—Abraham Lincoln had made himself known as the second in the hearts of the countrymen. So when that convention collided in disagreement, and none of the great men could prevail with a majority, Lincoln was chosen. The whole country thought it was an accident that this prairie lawyer Lincoln had been chosen over Seward! But no. Lincoln understood something. The ways of contention would never select the one right candidate. Lincoln was chosen because of who he was.

Now here were some of his beliefs. He would keep slavery from spreading into the Western territories. He would allow it in the South; he would not interfere. And he would guard his uncertainty as to God's purpose in this terrible conflict. Many people are disappointed when they learn that their hero Abraham Lincoln was not way out in front of the public with an intention to abolish slavery tomorrow. And many radical Republicans held this against him in his own day. Many people are troubled when they learned that he did not say to expect to give votes to the freed slaves after the war. Many are horrified to hear that he favored sending the freed slaves to Liberia in Africa as the solution to "the problem." You know, we want to have our heroes so clear. We want them like Psalm 1: we know the way of the wicked and we know the way of the righteous, and we want our heroes to walk the way of the righteous. It is disturbing to us to learn that Lincoln wasn't where we are or where we think he should have been. We are so eager for good to win over evil.

Seward had that kind of certainty; John Lord had that kind of certainty. But they could not lead the whole nation. Our desire to have leaders, heroes, or ourselves completely clear about what is righteous and what is evil. That desire holds to a static condition. There is no growth in it. Your guidance is coming from a higher father than your father. But Lincoln's way was not static. Lincoln was dynamic. He was open to something. He did not know God's will. His theology was in many respects that of an old school Presbyterian. His father was an old-school Presbyterian, full of wrath. Lincoln rejected Seward's "higher law" doctrine. He favored an approach more like John Lord's, in point of fact. But he did know God's will. And so he was able to move up a ladder of change, to grow, and to allow the events that unfolded before him to revise his understanding of what should be happening in this nation as the conflict grew darker and darker. He could not simply believe the Christian religion. That is something else that Christians are nervous about. Now, he didn't fail to enjoy talking with the Presbyterian pastors who served his family's churches in both Washington as well as Springfield. But he did not join a church, and he had many difficulties with doctrine. In this reluctance to know what is so about God, he gave expression to something high and subtle in the possibility and vision of America. Jacob Needleman writes about it in this way.

" . . . at its origin, American individualism is a spiritual ideal, not primarily social or economic or psychological. [However], one tends to hear that word "spiritual" and associate it with . . . belief systems, theology, doctrine or forms of behavior. But to believe a religious doctrine in itself implies little or nothing about the state of the soul. It depends on how a belief is held. Inwardly, one can believe in a religious doctrine in such a way that it serves the ego. Conversely, it is possible to turn away from all religious doctrine, yet inwardly be freer and more open to experiential contact with the actuality that is called God . . . It may seem paradoxical, but the study of the great teachers and guides of the world often reveals an individual's spiritual force manifesting as a rejection of "religion."³

On the occasion of Lincoln's hundredth birthday, Woodrow Wilson would say of him, "Lincoln saw things always with his own eyes. Most men see things with other men's eyes, and that is the pity of whole business of the world." Lincoln saw things with his own eyes. He could not see conventional religion as it was handed down to him. He went out of bounds. What can we say, but that because Lincoln could not accept the ordinary platitudes of the old-school religion that he was raised in, and yet could not reject the possibility of God's divine will, he was able to listen to people. He was able to let go and to grow and to change and to revise what he had seen. He was able at length in the midst of a terrible war to go down with his people, all of them, to a level place, to the field at Gettysburg, there to lay claim to a vision of the United States as dedicated to the proposition that all men and women are created equal. He *became* dedicated to the certainty that this is the higher law, and that this was the reason for the terrible war. It was "the woe due to both North and South" for the terrible effects of slavery, as he said in his second inaugural address. He went out of bounds. He set the captive free, because he did not know what is the will of God.

Now you may think that we're preaching Lincoln and not Christ this morning. But I don't intend to

preach anything but Christ. The history of the people of God and Christ cannot be dissected. If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is real, then Christ will appear in the form of Lincoln, of Martin Luther King, of Gandhi, of you. Reading Lincoln's life right is a way of reading Scripture right, and revising, letting ourselves be revised by an amazing grace. For reading Lincoln's life shows us that this very nation, when it was at the precipice of its greatest peril, was led by a man who did not teach fear. He did not teach hatred, but "malice toward none and charity for all." He did not pretend to know God's will, but he humbled himself to the idea that it is possible to serve God "with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, and that we all might do now all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

When I was in seminary, I was told that the great preaching professor of that seminary, Halford Luckock, taught that Psalm 1 cannot be used fruitfully in Christian worship because it divides too rigidly the righteous from the wicked. Well, today we have heard how Psalm 1 must be read in order that we grow by means of it. For with Lincoln's own voice, who says that "God gave this terrible war to both North and South as the woe due to those by whom the offense [of slavery] came,"—we see that we are the wicked, and we are the righteous. There is no separation. The wicked and the righteous are one, one in nation, one in this world—not just we who go to church, not just we who say our prayers, not just we who wave the beautiful stars and stripes. It is the prisoner, and the criminal, and the terrorist, and that enemy last named by our government, and the capitalist who pays evil wages, and the Muslim, and the Hindu, and the Buddhist and there is no end of these names. We are one. How urgent it is that you and I, who think we have no power and no influence over this dark and darkening world, let slip the chains of ordinary religious thinking, of fear of rejection, of desire for things, and comfort, and inclusion and move out of bounds where the blessing is. Where the blessing is. Amen.

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1. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, p. 146
2. http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/mon/generic/Speeches_Seward_NewTerritories.htm
3. Needleman, *The American Soul*, p. 180-181