

First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 2.13-17
“The Day Will Come”
The Rev. Dr. Fred G. Garry
November 19, 2017

Well, it's turkey time. I am purchasing my bird later today so I can brine it on Wednesday. Brining is great because it means you really can't overcook the turkey. It will be moist even with the most artless cooking.

Over the years we have developed a series of traditions around Thanksgiving. One tradition in our house is that I cook the turkey and bake the pies and Kathy does the rest. As someone who does a fair amount of cooking it feels like a holiday to me. There is a feeling of things being upside down. Things being upside down is actually a component of most western feast days.

Another tradition in our house is that you only eat what you want to eat. In the course of raising children, the rule of meal time is that you must try everything. We are not a big “clean your plate” house, but you can't say, I don't like it if you don't try it. This is not a biblical principle it is the influence of Dr. Seuss: try Green Eggs and Ham, try them you must. On Thanksgiving this rule is set aside. No one is forced even a bite at the feast.

Yet for me, the great Thanksgiving tradition is Abraham Lincoln. Twice a year I ponder the Civil War. I usually spend time considering Gettysburg near the fourth of July and without fail on the fourth Thursday of November I consider the life and example of Honest Abe.

I have done this for more than twenty years. I don't remember the exact date, but I remember it was during our time in Ohio that I stumbled across the Thanksgiving proclamations of Lincoln. The first time I read his proclamation of 1863 it brought me to tears. Here was a president in the darkest of hours, months after the most tragic of battles, with no end in sight, here he was wrapped in the misery and tragedy of families dying in battlefields and he proclaimed, “The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies.”

The Proclamation of 1863 lists a number of blessing that should not be forgotten, blessing that are “the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People.”

Having pondering this for more than twenty years I am ever surprised by the way the words guide me unto truth without force or shame. We must be grateful because God is merciful. There is a unique component to this proclamation that may not be well known. It was written for Lincoln. Secretary of State to Lincoln, William Seward, wrote the thanksgiving proclamation of 1863 for the president.

Seward is, in a sense, our neighbor. His home is Auburn, New York just a bit less than two hours away. He was not only Secretary of State and famous mostly for the acquisition of Alaska, known forever as Seward’s folly, he was not only these things, he was also a rival of Lincoln, what Doris Kearns Goodwin called Lincoln’s “team of rivals.” When elected president, Lincoln gather to his side all his detractors, his chief opponents, the men who had ridiculed and mocked his bid for president. He made of each a member of cabinet. The team of rivals.

When I began the process of composing this sermon, I was not surprised to find Lincoln skulking about, his words walking through my memories and contemplation. He is always a welcome guest especially at this time of year. He often leads me to a sense of gratitude, a feeling of well-being. With him I given hope that defies any obstacle or offence. Yet, on this occasion I found our walk to be more of a ramble, wider and longer. He walked me through our passage today.

Like Dante’s Virgil, I am blessed with guides who show the contours and pitfalls of life. I read our passage from Mark to the session on Thursday. After reading it I could hear Lincoln’s voice as I saw the polite nods of the elders. I could hear Lincoln say, this passage, well, it is a great deal of nonsense and gibberish.” I said this to the session, encouraging them. It’s okay to say this, we need to be honest about the strange quality of our lesson today.

Jesus is asked a straightforward question and he offered three teachings in response that seemingly fail to answer the query and seem to have little to do with one another. Nonsense and gibberish. Why do your disciples not engage in the discipline of fasting? Fasting is an ancient practice so to discipline the body and gain self-mastery, self-control. It is meant to hone the mind and let it become clear. We do it so to have better blood tests. Not quite the same, but there are points of similarity.

Jesus says, how can people at a feast practice fasting? There will come a time when the feast is over and then they will fast. Here I found Lincoln saying, “you know, I called for many more fast days than feast days.” And this true. He wasn’t the first president to do this, but he may have been the most one who called for the most fast days. Many times throughout his years in office he called the nation to put aside food for a day and take up prayer. He did this because we need to humble ourselves and recognize our sin and brokenness. As the nation ventured toward the brink of war and then as the conflict persisted, Lincoln called upon the nation to fast many times.

And this makes sense. It is hard to find the clarity of mind needed for patience and virtue as your blood boils with anger and righteous indignation. A fast day is a moment to cool your jets, to find the strength of humility when we can see our frailty. The key though to our holiday next Thursday is that we need both. We need to feast and we need to fast. And that

is what Jesus said. My disciples will feast and fast. It's not one or the other, one against the other. They are different.

And that's the way to understand the next two teachings. Fasting is the torn cloth. To mend the tear, you need humility, old cloth. We need tradition and we need to know our past, both the good and the not so good. We can't cover our brokenness with novelty or progress. We can't pretend tragic things did not happen. This is the point of fasting. We come to see our limitations, our weakness.

And the wineskins, the wineskins are the future. The wine needs to age, it is becoming. Wine is also an image of joy, happiness. Every time we celebrate communion with downcast eyes and solemn hearts we forsake the direction of Jesus. Wine is an image of joy not sorrow. It is the image of the feast, the celebration.

This is where I started to ramble with Lincoln. I have contemplated his feast days and fast days for many years. But heretofore I had yet to consider his life in terms of mending torn cloth and the need to find joy in the future.

What came to mind first was the common perspective that no one could have been more prepared for the devastation and loss of the civil war than Abraham Lincoln. His life was a long list of set backs, failures, demotions, bankruptcies, and most importantly, clinical depression. Lincoln knew what it meant to see your life as a worn out, torn cloth that needs to be mended. He knew and lived the truth that you cannot mend the past by looking ahead. It doesn't work that way. You need the fast day, the humility, the steel strength of patience and endurance that takes you through the darkest valley, the valley of the shadow of death.

While I am very aware of Lincoln's old cloth, I am not sure I would have been able to follow Lincoln to the wineskins had I not just seen a draft he wrote of the Emancipation Proclamation. The draft of the Emancipation Proclamation is in a Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. I saw the hand written draft in at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. A member of the church volunteered to show me around and I was stunned to see the hand written pages with their long sweeping letters.

What I can see now, though, is this: The Emancipation Proclamation was a new wineskin. It was a vessel for our experiment to mature, to grow. We could not put the freedom and dreams of our young nation into the old wineskins of slavery and racism. We would burst and lose our freedom, dash our dream.

Last month I was asked to give a speech to Catholic Charities in Ogdensburg. I was asked to speak about my friend, Alex Velto, who died a few years back. My talk was supposed to embody his life so to reveal the reason the Catholic Charities would want to honor him posthumously.

I have to say I was a bit intimidated. It is not often that a protestant speaks to all the religious clergy of Roman Catholic diocese- the room was thick with priests, nuns and even a bishop. I told the clerical crowd I would try not to be too Calvinist or Presbyterian. Yet, my other challenge is that my friend, who was being honored by the church was not a big fan of religion. I know this because for each of the years of my friendship with Alex he told me this, argued with me about this. And let us say his opinions were neither subtle nor demure.

In the end, what I tried to express to the Catholic crowd is our teaching today. I was the old cloth and Alex was the new wine. He was older than I was, but he was all about the future. I am a historian by training; I embody and vouchsafe ancient traditions; I am immersed in the truth that after changes we are more or less the same.

His life was opposite. Like Lincoln looking for a new vessel to hold freedom, Alex marched Martin Luther King Jr. Fought for affordable housing and food for the hungry where there was dignity with the bread. His vision was for a day when all the barriers of racism and sexism and homophobia would be cast aside. He was ever looking ahead.

What was great for us was a moment where we could see the value of each other. I was trying to mend the old cloth as it should be. To restore tradition with tradition. That was my job, is my job. And the longer we were together the more deference he gave to me because I wasn't trying to put the new freedoms he sought into my traditions. They were not to be commingled or confused. But most importantly though they didn't cancel each other out. Just because you have new wine doesn't mean the garment of tradition is mended. They are different; they are both necessary.

You need the feast day and you need the fast day. You need tradition and you need to look to the future. If they cancel each other out, your vision is false. I was trained to guard the authority of scripture and tradition; Alex was trained to break the shackle of every authority. In our friendship we could be the balance, the complement of our hearts.

Jesus said, there will come a day when the bridegroom takes off, when the feast is over and a fast is called for. And this is true. There will be days when it takes courage to stand, to walk, when the sound of joy is a fading echo. And as I venture about and listen to the hearts of many I hear an exhaustion and weariness today that seems more akin to a famine than a fast.

And perhaps that is true. But in spite of our many woes God is ever merciful and there is a great harvest. This Thursday is our feast day. It is a day to give thanks for too many blessing to count; it is the day we are to draw the strength of new wine, of joy.

As Lincoln took his leave from me, as our walking and rambling came to an end, I had one more insight. In the past, I took his example, his life of meekness, as the great example for presidents. No better example can be offered than to say, be a president like Lincoln. As he walked away though I heard a voice in me that said, leave such insights aside. Do not reserve his example for leaders and officials. Be a person who preserves the tradition; be a person who looks for the new wine skin. Don't look for such in others before you find them in yourself. I think I saw a fading smile. Amen.