

"Be Careful What You Pray For"
1 Samuel 8:4-18
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First Presbyterian Church, Lodi, WI
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(Second of two sermons on civility; see June 3, 2012 for part 1)

Last week, in advance of our gubernatorial election, we began a discussion about the need for civility, not just in the midst of this single election, but in all of our discussions with one another, whether they are in the state and national political arena or just part of our discussions here at the church, in school, at work, or in the local community. I advanced to you an idea from writer Parker Palmer who suggests that because we get hurt in life (and who doesn't?), we tend to turn our hurt on others, creating a kind of detrimental domino effect that results in anger, frustration, and even withdrawal from those around us who would otherwise be thought to be friends and neighbors. It was Palmer who said that when we our hearts are broken, it is up to us to see that our hearts are broken open rather than broken apart, so that we can continue to be part of our community and so that our pain can be turned into something profitable for everyone as we come together, rather than be torn apart.¹ I also predicted that there would be many hearts broken this week when the election returns were all in and counted.

Some of you are ecstatic about the outcome of the election. You may even yet be gloating over the victory. Shame on you. That is no way to teach our children how to win in any competition. Your hearts are not broken. Your hearts have been hardened to the hurt of others. Stop gloating. Now. Your candidate won. The election is over. It's time to move on. And it's time to put that energy into finding ways to build community rather than continue to break it down.

Some of your hearts have been broken apart rather than open because your candidate did not realize victory. You can test whether your hearts are broken apart rather than open by giving some thought to what your next steps will be. Anger? Revenge? A digging of heels into the sand? Then shame on you too. Your hearts have hardened as well. You put all of your eggs into one basket and the majority, however close the vote, did not agree with you. If you continue in that line of thinking, you will put your energy into retribution, revenge, rather than finding ways to build community.

Because I have mentioned Abraham Lincoln several times in recent sermons, I want to return to him at least once more as we continue our discussions about how we can discover and live out civility in our daily lives.

I heard a few years ago Doris Kearns Goodwin speak about Lincoln as a result of her research for a book on his political career.² She said that when his mother and sister died, there was no discussion at the time of an "after life." And he came to conclude that the only way he could live on after his own death would be "through the reputation he left behind" and he had a real fear he wouldn't live long enough to allow his ambition for success and legacy to be accomplished. In this way, I suppose, we could conclude that Lincoln felt driven to accomplish something of great worth for which he would be remembered, and that being elected President of the United States wasn't enough. He had to take responsibility as the leader of our Nation to create and manage the change necessary for the country to move forward.

¹ Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy, The Courage to Create a Politics worthy of the Human Spirit*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

² Doris Kearns Goodwin, from a speech to the Midwest Legislative Conference, Chicago, 8-23-2006.

Right out of the shoot, Lincoln did something that was unthinkable in political circles then and, most of the time, now. He looked to his opponents in the Republican primary for President and called upon these three men who really found Lincoln distasteful and undistinguished to serve in his cabinet. This “team of rivals”³ consisted of New York senator William H. Seward who would become Lincoln’s secretary of state; Ohio governor Salmon P. Chase, who served as Lincoln’s secretary of the treasury; and “Missouri’s distinguished elder statesmen Edward Bates,” who Lincoln appointed to be attorney general. To add to the surprise of appointing political enemies to serve in his cabinet, Republican President Lincoln called on three Democrats, Gideon Welles, Montgomery Blair, and Edwin M. Stanton, to serve as secretary of the navy, postmaster general, and secretary of war respectively. All of these men were “better known, better educated, and had more experience in public life than Lincoln.”⁴

But what the president accomplished in these appointments was to “turn his opponents into allies.” At first, his secretary of state tried to undermine him, but as the president’s term progressed, they became “fast friends.” The secretary of the treasury was “haunted by the desire to become president” himself, but he grew in his respect for Lincoln as they worked together and he witnessed Lincoln’s leadership. And, at first, war secretary Stanton “snubbed Lincoln due to his appearance and attire. But it was Stanton who, perhaps, grieved most deeply for the president when he was killed.”⁵

The issue here that concerns us today is how it is that Lincoln would or could possibly overlook the unabashed opposition of all of these men and appoint them to such positions of power in his administration, appoint them to such sensitive slots that they could easily have condemned Lincoln’s presidency rather than help him leave the legacy he so dearly desired.

Goodwin suggests several criteria for this kind of leadership which, I suggest to you, are all essential for reclaiming civility among ourselves and demanding it of our leaders:

1. Lincoln had a “quiet self confidence.” He was humble.
2. He had a “remarkable capacity for understanding ideas other than his own.
3. He believed that “denunciation leads to denunciation.” Or, as I have put it earlier, anger leads to revenge.
4. Lincoln believed that he had to “reach into people’s hearts;” that “empathy allowed him to share credit” for any and all ideas which he might well have claimed for his own.
5. He stood up to his critics, without doubt, but he also took the blame for mistakes and didn’t pass that blame on to anyone else.
6. President Lincoln also knew of the necessity to restore his own strength. After visits to the battlefield and walking among the wounded, he would take time away. During his presidency, Lincoln “went to the theatre a hundred times. He knew he couldn’t continue to take the pressure without safety valves.”⁶

In our scripture today, we find Samuel who has been an excellent judge, a leader of the Hebrew people and chosen for that position by God. Judges weren’t kings or presidents as we think of them; they certainly didn’t wield that kind of power. They governed more by mediation or by helping the Hebrew tribes build community which meant negotiating justice for all and a disdain for favors or preference for the privileged. His sons became judges as well, but they weren’t good at it and the people became restless. So they looked to neighboring nations and

³ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals, The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

⁴ Goodwin, p. xvi

⁵ Goodwin, speech

⁶ Goodwin, speech

tribes who were not God's so-called people and discovered that those folks did not have judges, they had kings. And the people decided that what they wanted was a king.

Samuel felt terrible about this. He felt he had let God down because it seemed that the people were turning from God's plan to their own. And, indeed, that's what they were doing. But God told Samuel not to take this personally. God said the people were not turning on Samuel for anything he had done wrong, but they were rejecting God who was their true king and demanding a human king. The message Samuel relayed to the people from God can pretty much be summed up by saying, "Be careful what you pray for." God knew and knows that human beings are easily led astray, that they crave power, and love money. And because human beings all make mistakes, the people could expect that any leader they had of their own choosing or chosen by other human beings would lead to their greater distress, not their peace and justice.

The story, of course, is that the people got their king, the first in what would be a very long monarchy and all because they thought that doing it the way they saw others doing it would somehow be better than allowing God to rule in their lives. They wanted to be like everybody else, and God permitted it to happen. They turned from being a community centered around worship of God to a community centered around human citizenship in a human-led government.

Now, if it weren't for the likes of Abraham Lincoln and a handful of other truly great human leaders throughout history, we would certainly be in a whole lot worse condition than we are now, and that seems impossible to imagine. You and I have been just like the people Israel who turned from God and put their trust completely in human leadership.

It just doesn't work. And what we can learn from Lincoln is that regardless of how we feel about our opponents whether they are political or at work or school or live next door or in the same house, there are matters of integrity, of civility that are required if we are not only to peacefully co-exist, but build a community whether that is of one or two or a family or a church, village, or a nation.

Peter Block suggests in his book *Community*, that a community's well-being is dependent upon social capital. "Social capital is about acting on and valuing our interdependence and sense of belonging. It is the extent to which we extend hospitality and affection to one another. . . . we need to create a community where each citizen has the experience of being connected to those around them and knows that their safety and success are dependent on the success of all others."⁷ He says what we have in our country today is a context that "markets fear, assigns fault, and worships self-interest." He says that as citizens of this country, we have allowed our candidates for public office to become objects of marketing and that makes us consumers. He contends we need to turn that around. That we need to build our community together, come together in our differences, determine together what it is that we want to accomplish and then we find the leader to help us do that.

What we have been doing is sitting around waiting for potential leaders to tell us what we ought to do and then we can blame them when everything goes wrong. If you and I were to work together, truly listening to one another, and turning to scripture, to God for our direction, we would have to take responsibility ourselves rather than finding someone else to blame. But in the midst of this idea of building social capital in our church and in our community, we would be doing exactly what Abraham Lincoln did when he built his team of rivals to help him lead this country: we would be listening carefully to one another, we would give extra effort toward understanding one another's ideas and opinions, we would stop condemning one another and always work to build one another up, and we would stop blaming other people for everything that's wrong in this country.

⁷ Peter Block, *Community*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2008

And, finally, or perhaps foremost, *our* emphasis on restoring our own souls so that we have the strength to be civil in our dealings with one another would be to put God first in our lives rather than isolated to a Sunday morning worship or not present at all.

So, folks, open your broken hearts to one another, whether they have been recently broken through an election or broken through a world of other means. Be careful what you pray for, because when it comes to human leadership, we will always be disappointed, and God may permit that to happen. The only leader to whom we can look for sure and certain authority on how to behave, how to lead, how to respond to being hurt, and how to be civil to one another is our Lord Jesus Christ. If we follow his example and command to love God with our hearts, minds and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves, we can, once again, discover what it means to live in a community that responds to God's requirement to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Amen..