

Remembering to Remember  
John 15:12-14

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." It almost feels to me that Lincoln could have easily included this single verse in his speech at Gettysburg without changing the theme or the intent.

If we had the right as Americans to add scripture to the Bible, to express our understanding of how we were to live together in the struggles of life, I sense that there would be several words from the Declaration of Independence, the Opening to the Constitution, and the entirety of the Gettysburg Address.

Several years ago we took our children to Gettysburg for a couple of days. It was fall and the perfect time to be there. On the day of our Gettysburg tour, especially when we stopped at "Little Round Top" I was overcome with emotion. Now Barb will tell you that is not normal for me, but standing there I couldn't help but think of the thousands who died during that 3 day battle. Both sides feeling they were fighting for the right side, and in the end, even though the north was declared the winner, most would agree that America was the ultimate loser.

Generations of men and women have fought for a cause. Several of you have worn the uniform of your country and placed yourself in harms way. We are all grateful for your sacrifice and for the sacrifice of those unable to be here this morning.

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address may be the best speech ever given expressing both the sense of great loss and the appreciation of a grateful nation. It is only 272 words in length so I invite you to once again listen to it in its entirety.

(Play the video)

Just a little history. Shortly after the Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin asked David Wills of Gettysburg to oversee the cleanup of the battle's aftermath. All across the battlefield lay the dead from both armies, decaying in the

summer heat. Rather than hastily burying the dead where they lay, Wills acquired 17 acre of land for a national cemetery so that permanent resting places would be available.

Germantown landscape architect William Sanders drew up plans for the cemetery, and burial began not long after. On September 23, wishing to formally dedicate the cemetery, Wills invited the highly respected Edward Everett to give a speech. The date selected was Oct 23, but Everett asked for additional time to prepare. The ceremony was then set for November 19.

On November 2, 1863, almost as an afterthought, wills invited President Lincoln to also make a "few appropriate remarks".

Lincoln accepted the invitation, and gave a speech that lasted around 2 1/2 minutes, opposed to Everett's 2 hour long oration. Everett's speech was quickly forgotten, while Lincoln's words were appreciated almost immediately for the significance attributed to them.

These 272 words probably say more about our nation, what defines us, and what we care about, more than any other historical document we can cite.

For on November 19th, 156 years ago, Abraham Lincoln defined the American character in a speech written on an envelope while traveling to that site. He certainly did not understand the significance of what he was about to say, and neither did his audience, but in few words he defined, or at least continued what our founding fathers intended in the documents that defined this new nation. The founding fathers fashioned a revolution. They established a nation based on faith. Yes, a faith in God and a faith in themselves. A secular faith without establishing a state religion...We find these truths to be self-evident...this is a statement of faith. For it is not based on any fact, but rather on the unknown; on the untried and the unprovable. Before all power was vested in a monarch or a tsar sitting on the throne at the calling of the Divine. Sovereignty was by divine right and religion was a tool of the state. But the grand experiment that eventually became the United States wished no part of the old customs. It was revolutionary. But it was still a part of a belief system. This time, though, the belief was vested in the people rather than the power elite. There was nothing in history to prove the truth of the following...*We find these truths to be self evident that all men*

*are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights...*

The self-evidence was the belief in God and in their own character. They were different than the thrones of Europe. America was the place where all human beings were created as equals, of course it took the Civil War to make the self-evident barely legal. And we are still in the midst of that battle.

The Constitution does not deal with equality. It was Lincoln, 156 years ago, in Gettysburg, in the middle of a war that questioned that very premise and that very faith in country and principles that truly solidified who we are and what we believe.

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty and dedicate to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.*

Gary Wills, in his book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, write, "The Gettysburg Address has become the authoritative expression of the American spirit--as authoritative as the Declaration itself, and perhaps even more influential, since it determines how we read the Declaration. For most people now the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution without overthrowing it...By accepting the Gettysburg Address, its concept of a single person dedicated to a proposition, we have been changed. Because of it we live in a different America."

Faith requires more of us than belief. It is easy to say we believe in equality. It is easy for us to look to the past and say that we have done our part. Some of you worked hard in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. And in the last decade I have marched down a southern street still fighting for this illusive principle.

Some of you have stood beside Jewish and Muslim neighbors when others were quick to judge or condemn. We live in a world that wants to blame with broad brush strokes, never taking the time to get to know people one-on-one. Pointing fingers is easy, holding hands in unity is not.

We are engaged in a great war...this time not a civil war, but a culture war, testing whether this nation so conceived and so dedicated in an idea that religion need not be the basis of civil

authority can long endure. We are people based on faith, not a prescribed and limited religion. We have faith in a loving and caring God and faith that through us God can change the world.

Too often religion is used to diminish others, to devalue them, to condemn them. We are called to lift each other up, to build up one another, to strengthen our ties even when differences threaten to divide.

*It is rather for us to be here delivered to the great task remaining before us--that we highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new rebirth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*

The framers of our Declaration and our Constitution set us on the path of a grand experiment. We have lived it out for the last 200 plus years and we are still attempting to get it right. Lincoln's address probably has done more to redefine and redirect us than any other document in American history. What it claims for us is no less than God's fingerprint in each person's life. Christ came to unite in love and was willing to die for that principle. Lincoln stood on a battlefield and attempted to do the same thing. As faithful people we are called to unity, to love, to compassion, and to action. The best honor we can give on this Memorial Day is to hold these principles as foundational to how we live our lives, today, and every tomorrow.