

**TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU; MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30; JULY 16, 2017;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

It is hard for us to imagine that moment, in 1865, when President Lincoln took the podium to deliver his Second Inaugural Address. The tide of war had turned in favor of the Union and the end was in sight – but over 600,000 soldiers, north and south, had died – dwarfing our losses in all of the wars fought before and since combined.

When Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, in 1863, the platform from which he spoke was surrounded by people standing among wooden caskets stacked high, waiting to be filled with the slaughtered bodies that still lay in the fields.

At the Second Inaugural, the mood in the North among many was not just weariness but long-awaited celebration at the emerging victory, yet the tone of the speech is subdued rather than triumphant. The address reached an eloquence, rare among heads of state, marked by a gripping combination of tenderness and determination.

I refer to Lincoln and our Civil War today because it sheds needed light on the present circumstances of the nation and illustrates this mornings' story from Matthew.

Pundits repeatedly say how the current politics and leadership in Washington are unlike any we have experienced before and in many ways that is true.

But the common ground we share in 2017 with the nation and culture during the War Between the States is of interest not only because of the similarities of polarization around politics and ideology but because Lincoln's leadership, for which he is regarded as perhaps our greatest president, offers a path through today's conflicted landscape.

It is time to build bridges in this country but the materials for construction are scant; the political planks used in the past to cobble bipartisan cooperation are now gangplanks on which those who attempt collaboration are forced to walk.

Things were every bit as contentious, partisan and fractured in the years that preceded the Civil War. Lincoln's rise to the White House concluded a decade of sparring between the North and South over the increasingly irreconcilable question of slavery. The Compromise of 1850 brought peace for a time by divvying up new states and territories, equally, as slave or free.

The Congressional wrangling sounds like today. Legislation, proposed by Henry Clay, Lincoln's model statesman and leader of the Whig Party was salvaged by Stephen Douglas, Lincoln's nemesis and a Democrat, when he pushed to settle a series of regional disputes separately rather than in an omnibus motion, thus keeping alive North/South hostilities but preserving the fragile Compromise. Douglas, claiming to be a savior, then used his influence to win approval for two railroad bills that made him a very wealthy man. Yet, to gain needed support he capitulated to the South to repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that protected Nebraska as a free state. Thus, the teetering truce of the Compromise quickly unraveled and it was unclear who would emerge to lead and whether they would be pro or anti slavery.

This was the backdrop of the presidential campaign of 1860 – a campaign that packed as much drama as our recent presidential race. The long-standing feud between Lincoln and Douglas that began with their attempts to win the affections of Mary Todd decades before and shadowed their careers in Congress, ignited the rhetoric on the campaign trail for president. We are lucky Lincoln won.

Once in office, the speed and decisiveness with which he took action to bring slavery to an end is stunning. Africans and their descendants had been enslaved in North America for 250 years. Slavery had survived wars and revolutions, economic upheavals, and a variety of governments. Fifteen presidents had come and gone, as had more than thirty Congresses and not one of them had made a serious effort to undermine slavery. Yet within a mere 18 months of taking office, Lincoln announced in the Emancipation Proclamation the freeing of three million slaves in the southern states.¹

Nine months later he stood at the podium in Gettysburg and made of that famous address a literary “Independence Hall” as he articulated a vision that transformed the Constitution from a document ensuring the rights of white men to one that ensured the rights of all men.

Finally, after winning a second term, in the Second Inaugural, considered one of his great speeches, he disappointed those who would have gleefully punished the South.

Lincoln again summoned a moral courage rarely seen among elected leaders and like the Prodigal Son’s father, extended open arms to the Confederate states and offered a vision for a new South where all would enjoy the rights and privileges of democracy including most especially former slaves.

What stands out in Lincoln’s speeches is a moral vision that embodied his politics. Taking the moral high ground was never sacrificed for the politically expedient. Imagine words like these spoken to the deep divisions in our nation today.

A humble commander in chief: “Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged.

A commander in chief guided by deep faith and the scales of justice: “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Finally, a magnanimous ‘healer in chief’: “With malice toward none; with charity toward all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

We might ask ourselves how Lincoln did it; where did such leadership come from; how did a man surrounded by hostile and conflicting powers remain above the fray and keep his eye on the best of human nature rather than our worst, include himself as a sinner, and restrain himself over and over from throwing the first stone?

Matthew 11 offers an answer. The two portions we have today of Jesus' sayings appear unrelated; the first talks about children who cannot agree on the games they play and the second is Jesus' prayer on the mystery of God's revelation and the invitation to the tired and disillusioned to come to him.

Lincoln, as his speeches illustrate, was a superb student of Scripture. It was pondering passages like this that helped him see through the fog of war and enabled him to speak confidently of God's justice. What comes through is the absence of anything forced by fiat or imposed for retribution. His words and manner reflect the deep peace Jesus promises to give us even as the battles of life ebb and flow. There is signature calm and steadiness in Lincoln's manner and conduct.

Where does it come from? It comes from one who has taken the yoke of God upon himself, which is to say, one who has let go of all the other yokes – self-imposed, politically imposed, status imposed – that the world seeks to place on our shoulders.

Let's go back to the first sayings; the children who can't agree what games to play are those in Jesus' generation who fail to hear John's message or get who Jesus is. They are the very ones – the scholars and religious leaders – who labor under other yokes; yokes of power, status, and political survival.

The ones who do understand are, ironically, the ones who have no formal training or position of authority. They are the ones the religious authorities routinely condemn – sinners, tax collectors, and lepers. Yet, these 'sinners', freely accept the instruction, healing, and call to service – that is the yoke – Jesus summons them to accept.

Now the second portion of sayings, the familiar "Come unto me" invitation, makes sense; those who know and accept Jesus are the ones who have responded to his invitation. Responding to Jesus requires obedience to a teacher who is gentle, meek and humble and who calls his followers to a new way of learning in which they become more and more like him by imitating his example.

The paradox and secret of carrying God's burden is in the phrase, "Put on my yoke and learn from me, I am gentle and humble. And *you will find rest* for your souls. My yoke is easy to bear, my burden is light."

The English word "rest" can also be translated as "Sabbath" and even more powerfully as "salvation." Those who take the yoke of Jesus, the work of God, the ministry of peace and justice upon themselves find rest, salvation, peace of mind and heart in their labor even though they may face, like Lincoln, the crisis of war. Apparently, education, amassed wealth, religious denomination and political party have nothing to do with the ability to recognize who Jesus is or the truth of his preaching. Rather it has to do with getting out the way of our own needy, demanding egos and following a gentle teacher.

Matthew is telling us neither God nor Jesus is a genie to be controlled by human status or brilliance. God is known as the gift of grace.

One more thing about the yoke: it is Jesus' yoke of moral values and decision-making. Eighty years before Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural a little philosopher, from Konigsburg, Prussia who took his morning constitutional so consistently people set their clocks by his passing by their homes; this little man who was the pivotal thinker of the modern era and considered as important as Plato said that authentic religion is not known and practiced by reason but by what he called "the moral imperative." In other words, moral awareness is the gateway to religious truth. And in giving this insight Immanuel Kant validated religious faith in a time when reason was all the rage and he liberated religion from narrow-minded sectarianism.

God's yoke, Jesus' yoke is the moral burden God places upon us. It is not the conservative or liberal burden; it is not the Tea Party or Black Lives Matter burden; it is the moral burden. It is the question of what is right; what would please God; what would Jesus, if he were here, counsel.

This is the take away in an era when political ideology demands the ultimate allegiance of a religious faith and has become a litmus test for everything from our friends to what media outlets we trust to our basic view of the world. We are held hostage to "blue" and "red."

It is past time for us to start talking, across all that divides us, about the health and wellbeing of the country. There is, I would wager, equal disbelief on both sides of the political spectrum about how those who hold to such views could possibly be so mistaken. That's the frame of reference that erodes our democracy.

The stakes are way too high. Start with the climate and algae blooms that are turning more and more of our great lakes into bodies of water we are advised to avoid.

Or the question of how the wealthiest nation on earth is considering abandoning two of every three seniors living in skilled nursing facilities; or thousands of opiate addicts; or basic screening for breast cancer, or services for mental illness while nations far less affluent and far more dictatorial find it within themselves to offer universal health care for their citizens. Or, for that matter, the core principle of democracy called mutual responsibility.

These are not political issues; they are not economic issues; they are first and foremost moral issues. Recognizing that the War of Secession was not primarily about industrial vs. agrarian culture, or states rights vs. federal power but that the decision to secede was driven by evil of slavery, Lincoln was able to lead us with clarity and compassion.

It's time to stop abdicating our precious heritage bought with the blood of our ancestors; *it's time* to put off the yoke of liberal and conservative politics and reclaim the common ground of our moral conscience;

It's time to reclaim the soul of the nation. Amen.

ⁱ James Oakes, "The Supreme Partisan," *The New York Review of Books*, July 13, 2017, 28ff. Oakes's article reviewing the new Lincoln biographical series by Sidney Blumenthal, vol 1 and 2 was very helpful in this summary of Lincoln's position of slavery as the driving issue of his presidency.