

United We Stand

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Feb. 12, 2006
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

Last week I preached about the religious divisions that are ripping our world apart here in the first decade of the 21st century. And I have spoken, on other occasions, about the political divisions, here in America, and elsewhere – fault-lines that have also begun tearing at the very fabric of our social structure. Taken together, these rifts – based, as they are, on profoundly different views of the world and of humanity – are the two main fronts in what has come to be known as “the culture war.”

And so, I think it is perhaps appropriate for us to look back at the only other historical period in which I believe our nation, and the foundation on which it was built, were as at risk of being ripped asunder, as they are today. This morning, on the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, I will propose that we might find hope, and take courage, in the example of the man who – against all odds, overcoming his own deep periods of despair and depression – somehow managed, to save the Union.

For today, I believe that our union is once again, in need of saving.

We have been told that we are involved in a “culture war.” The use of that word – “war” – is, I am sure, no accident. We have been told that what is going on here, in our generation, is nothing less than “a battle for the heart and soul of America.”

And we have allowed these terms, these phrases, to set the tone for our national debate. It is no wonder, then, that we see, every day, further evidence of the fact that some of those who have volunteered for this battle,

will stop at nothing to defame, demoralize, even eliminate, those on the other side of the line that has been drawn in the sand.

And so, I say, like the cast of the musical “Hair” – which once sang, with dripping irony – “Happy Birthday, Abie Baby.” Happy birthday, indeed – because Abraham Lincoln, who reminded a nation that “a house divided against itself cannot stand,” surely must be turning over in his grave this morning, at the state of our union.

Recently I happened to see a video of Martin Luther King Jr.’s

“I Have a Dream” speech. While watching it, I became profoundly aware, all over again, of the powerful visual image of the setting where King chose to speak. Here was the great man of my childhood, calling on those of his generation to live up to the ideals of our founders, that all are created equal – what I would call “universalism in action” – and all the while, towering over him, making of Dr. King just a tiny speck, was the giant, impassive statue of the great man from a previous generation.

Today, the legacies of both these men – Lincoln, and King – loom over us – guides on the path to unity, or perhaps judges of our poor progress. And I say to you in anguish and frustration – where are the giants of our time? Where are such leaders, such voices, today? Where are those who would show us the way out of our division, and toward that promised land of peace, liberty, and justice for all?

Today I see, as I look around the American landscape, none – be they politicians, preachers, or prophets – who dare to speak with the power and the conviction of Dr. King, or of Abraham Lincoln.

And so, for inspiration, I turn to a little book – “The Living Words of Abraham Lincoln” – and I find this comment, from an impassioned address to Congress: “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate for the stormy present.”

And I find this simple, opening line, from his famous “House Divided” speech: “If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it.”

And then I read Lincoln's assessment of where the nation was, in 1855, and whither it was tending:

“ Our progress in degeneracy appears, to me, to be pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that all men are created equal, except Negroes. [Soon it may be that] all ... are created equal except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics. [And if] it comes to this, I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty.”

Making a pretense of loving liberty! Yes, there are more than a few echoes of 1855, here in 2006... It is chilling how, in just a few, brief, years, we have degenerated into alienation, and polarization. Only the categories have changed: Today, we are split into Left and Right, red state and blue state, Trinitarian and Unitarian, Muslim and Christian, gay and straight. Oh, and by the way, the racial divide that tormented Lincoln and his contemporaries continues, if only in a different form.

How strange and foolish these walls that divide us.

Yet, listen to these words of Lincoln – from that same speech: “This talk about the dissolution of the Union is humbug – nothing but folly... I do not expect the Union to be dissolved; I do not expect the house to fall – but I do expect, that it will cease to be divided.”

And so, too, my friends, must we. Knowing it is only united that we stand, we must expect that these strange and foolish walls dividing us can, and will, be torn down. Painfully aware, as Lincoln said, of just “where we are and whither we are tending” – we must consider how we might begin to tear down the walls.

Here, like A. Powell Davies, I find my hope in the recognition that we are “bound together in a common destiny,” that we are “each lighted by the same, precarious, flickering flame.” As I said to you last month, on Martin Luther King Sunday, it is with this recognition that we can begin to see, even in our adversaries, “a human face” – and then we might, at last, begin to erase those walls of separation.

Indeed, it seems to me that the only way out of the mess we find ourselves in today, is same as it has always been – to love our neighbor,

as ourself. To find the common ground. And when the ideologies of politics and religion become the very things that are dividing us – when, as the character the Secretary of the World says in George Bernard Shaw’s play Geneva: “The problem before us is how to establish peace, among people who heartily dislike one another, and have very good reasons for doing so” – when this is the situation in which we find ourselves, all that we have left to turn to, is that one, precarious, flickering flame – our common humanity.

And though it may not seem like enough – it always has been. That empowering awareness of our common human bond is what Abraham Lincoln relied on, in a time far less enlightened than our own. He didn’t just emancipate the slaves; in a very real sense, he declared that they were human.

That empowering awareness of our common human bond is what Jesus relied on, in a time far less enlightened than even that of Lincoln. Jesus didn’t just preach about equality – he lived it. And in the process, he reminded those around him of what they had forgotten: that the unclean and the unhealthy, the prostitutes and lepers and children and women and even the hated Samaritans were – all of them – human.

When confronted with evil and hatred, division and recrimination – Lincoln, Jesus, Martin Luther King – they all returned to the basics: To the proposition that, whatever separates us, is nothing compared to that which unites us.

I submit to you today that, in our own little way, just last Sunday, we, too, returned to the basics: To the proposition that, whatever separates us, is nothing compared to that which unites us.

Last week, we ourselves made an effort to break down those strange and foolish walls that divide us – by contributing, and generously (more than \$500, in fact) – toward the rebuilding efforts of several small, Baptist congregations in Alabama, that were destroyed by an act of hate.

The members of these churches are people with whom we do not agree, theologically. These are people who, no doubt, if we were to look only as deep as our respective stances on some of the more controversial social issues of the time – we might not find much common ground.

Yet we have a common humanity. And by allowing our hearts to go out to them, as human sisters and brothers, as fellow members of small churches whose spiritual homes had been violated, and viciously burned to the ground, we have discovered that which unites us.

Who knows what our check, and our concern and our compassion, might mean to those suffering people? Who knows what reaching out to folks with whom we don't agree, might mean to us – how it might change us?

Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.

What if it were our church that was attacked? How might we receive the love and help of others – even if we differed from them in religion or politics or any of the other strange and foolish walls that divide us?...

... Some more words from Abraham Lincoln:

“ [Let us] adopt some practical system by which the two races can gradually live themselves out of their old relation to each other, and both come out better prepared for the new.”

Gradually live themselves out of their old relation. That is what we, all of us, here in the 21st century – regardless of which side of the “culture war” we come down on – must learn to do, if this union is to survive. We must live ourselves out of those tired old, hopeless, dead-end, adversarial relationships – and into a new way of being together. A new union.

Ah, but there's that word “gradually” in Lincoln's comment... Change, especially as deep and fundamental a change as we are talking about here, can only come slowly. It can be no other way.

We are entrenched; we are creatures of habit, creatures of distrust. And trust must be earned.

Make no mistake: Trust won't be earned by what last week I called “spiritual abuse.” It will not be earned by religious name-calling, or by acts of subtle violence or by petty political revenge.

It can only be earned by taking the first step. By a willingness to start anew. By forgiveness. By that oh-so-golden rule.

In the Gettysburg Address, Carl Sandburg points out that Lincoln, though he could have chosen otherwise, honored the fallen soldiers of both sides who died there:

“ ‘We cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow, this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far beyond our power to add or detract.’ ”

“ Lincoln could have said, ‘brave Union men,’ ” Sandburg writes, “Did he have a purpose in omitting the word ‘Union.’? ... Did he mean to leave an implication that there were brave Union men and brave Confederate men ... who had struggled there? ... Was he [perhaps] thinking of the Kentucky father whose two sons died in battle – one in Union blue, the other in Confederate gray – [who] inscribed on the stone over their double-grave, ‘[Only] God knows which was right.’ ”...

In all that we do, in this day and in the days to come – through the grace that is the Love we call the spirit of this church – let us remember those six, important words: only God knows who is right.

And if we are, indeed, Universalists – if we affirm that the sacred depth of the Universe, God by whatsoever name – neither judges, nor divides – let us not do so, either.

United we stand. May it ever be so.

Namaste. Amen.