

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ**

**The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper**

**Sunday, October 25, 2020**

**Fourth in a Five Sermon Series: “With Malice toward None”**

**“A Just and Lasting Peace”**

**Christian Scripture: James 1:19-27**



This week and next, I will pray for peace using our Vermont Conference Twenty-Day Prayer Prompt (as recently advertised in *eNews*). I encourage you to as well. I pray for peace for two reasons. One, because my own soul can't stand contestation.



developed high blood pressure (Me! Always with low blood pressure due to my running!). I remember a group of SIT (School for International Training) students voiced a complaint against me. I had no appetite until I was absolved and the students and I reconciled. I once had a disagreement with my daughter about the lyrics in a rap song. I felt so terrible that we had an argument that I actually trembled. My experience is that confrontation, or any rupture in relationship, haunts me. Sometimes, I can scarcely think of anything else. Any division between me and someone else negatively manifests itself physically. Broken relationships sicken my soul. Dis-unity causes me to suffer.



As people of faith, we know that Jesus' mission and purpose in the world was to reconcile humans to God. You see, our human natures cause us to seek our wills rather than God's. The theological term for his behaviour is 'sin'. Sin causes a break in our relationship with God. And this division between us and God haunts us. It causes within us dis-ease. Jesus' life and ministry sought to reunite us with God, our Creator. The entire Gospel message is that Jesus the Christ ends the division between us and God and reconciles us.

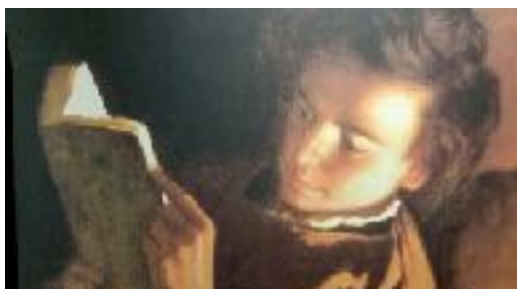


Because of my personal experience and because of my faith, I feel I can really understand Abraham Lincoln when he concluded his 1865 second inaugural address with the following words:

"With malice toward none; with charity for 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 a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

"With malice toward none; with charity for 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 a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations".

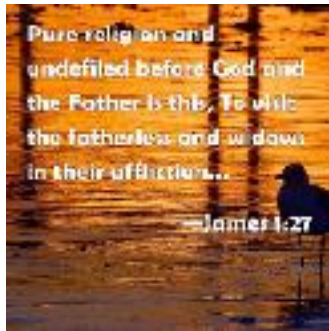
Though not necessarily a confessing or practicing Christian, Abraham Lincoln's writings are saturated with biblical imagery.



Because he was poor and received little formal education, Lincoln depended on the Bible as a pedagogical primer text. As a child, Lincoln essentially memorized the Bible and he used what he remembered to great effect later in life because his audiences, both north and south, were largely Christian. In his address toward the conclusion of the Civil War, Lincoln, while still definitively on a political side held out an olive branch. In his address, Lincoln preached reconciliation and unity to the nation with the immortal phrase ‘with malice toward none’. At the end of the address Lincoln pleaded, “...let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle for his widow and his orphan, to do that which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations”.



“...to bind up the nations wounds” is extracted and morphed from Psalm 147:3 that reads, “[God] heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds”.



The rest of Lincoln's quoted sentence is inspired by James 1:27 that reads, "Religion that God our [Parent] accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after the orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world".

In offering an olive branch and encouraging reconciliation and unity, Lincoln expressed the paradox of certainty and doubt, self-assured conviction and humility. The address demonstrated that one can, and often must, choose sides, but one must not dehumanize the other. As people of faith, we are to be living, breathing, walking oxymorons. We must proclaim the gospel with boldness to our enemies while in the same breath say to them "I love you. Let us be together in peace despite our differences". I practice this difficult balance every week at the Solidarity Friday rally in Pliny Park. Not a day Friday goes by without people venomously screaming-out the windows of their pick-up trucks "F-You!!!" as I stand there and quietly and smile with our church's "Hate Has No Home Here" sign.



The history of the United States through Abraham Lincoln teaches us that it is right and good to yearn and strive for unity and reconciliation despite our differences. We should never consider ourselves to be blue states and red states, but rather 'united states'.

The history of our faith through the prophets and Jesus Christ, teaches us that God yearns for and strives for unity and reconciliation with us despite our sinful states. We should never consider ourselves to be the righteous ones and unredeemed ones, but rather all 'children of God'.



It is my prayer that all in this community of faith at Centre Congregational Church remain united in Christ Jesus despite our political differences. May we never withhold ourselves from worship or fellowship because what we hear differs from that which that which we understand to be true. May we as members of Centre Church demonstrate to our community and to the world the power of love in Christ.



If we who are members of the same faith, the same denomination, and the same church, if we cannot show and demonstrate Christ's love to one another, I ask you, honestly, deep down, I ask you, what hope is there for our nation and for our world to ever reach "a just and lasting peace"?

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".