

A More Perfect Union - An Open Letter to Washington

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



John 18:33-38

Dear friends in Washington, be ye Democrat, Republican, Independent, Liberal, Conservative, Moderate, Black, White, Brown, etc., etc.

I share this letter on July 2, 2017. On this day 154 years ago approximately 100,000 American men met in the environs of a small town in Pennsylvania named Gettysburg. It was to be the second day of a three-day battle. July 2 on its own would come to be marked as one of the costliest engagements of the civil war. 100,000 Union and Confederate soldiers went to battle on that day and one fifth of them, 20,000, on that day alone would end up killed, wounded, captured or missing. War is not glorious nor is it to be glorified. War tears at the fabric of society and the fabric of the human soul and the fabric of the human body. All things considered, war represents our failure as humans, not our success.

Nevertheless, friends in Washington, the battle of Gettysburg, and the Civil War of which it was a part, strangely was an effort to somehow preserve the essential fabric of the nation, and more deeply, the human community. Abraham Lincoln five months later in dedicating the National Cemetery at Gettysburg reminded those in attendance that the nation had been conceived in liberty and was dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal and that the war itself was a test as to whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated could long endure. In other words, will the fabric of liberty and equality remain woven?

Abraham Lincoln, of course, in writing his address looked to the sacred text of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration penned four score and seven years before on July 4, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by

their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." The fireworks of this weekend celebrate the essential fabric of our national life and our human endeavor – that proposition that all are created equal and all are endowed with unalienable rights.

"We the People," so starts the preamble of our Constitution, "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union ..." To form a more perfect union. Gouveneur Morris who penned those words had his fingers on the new nation's pulse – the heartbeat of the human spirit whose only sustainable rhythm is being united, not divided. It says as much in our national seal: the unfurled ribbon held fast in the eagle's beak containing the Latin - E. Pluribus Unum – Out of many, one – if only to reiterate what is etched in all our sacred texts from Jefferson to Morris to Lincoln --that the American endeavor is to unite all people – regardless of creed or color – into one tapestry woven into an indivisible fabric.

It is this human yearning that gave us the nerve to receive the gift from our French brothers and sisters and place the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor and then mount inside her pedestal the immortal words of Emma Lazarus:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Friends in Washington, in the Hebrew scriptures the prophet Jeremiah implores us to "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls." Friends in Washington, it is incumbent we believe, upon those who are called to lead civilization's great institutions of freedom to ask for the ancient paths and to study the ancient texts so as to not forget what foundation upon which we seek to build – the fabric we seek to preserve. George Santayana reminded us,

"Those who do not recall the past are condemned to repeat it." Yet perhaps the inverse is truer still: Those who do not recall the past – who do not study the ancient ways, the sacred texts, are condemned NOT to repeat them.

Friends in Washington, we who seek to follow the rabbi Jesus –the One we believe to be the incarnate Word of God – are reminded in our sacred text of that time when he was given audience in the halls of government – the Roman government. That time when Jesus stood before Pilate in the shadows of the great Roman eagle.

Pilate endowed with the delegated powers of Caesar – Jesus endowed, as we believe, with the begotten nature of God. And there the two talked of kingdoms. "My kingdom," Jesus said, "is not of this world ... for I have come to bear witness to the truth." And Pilate asked, "What is truth?" And the truth, as Jesus taught, was that the kingdom of heaven is in our midst. The kingdom of heaven is within our grasp. The kingdom of heaven is right before us. And this kingdom was seen in Jesus' mission to form a more perfect union of God's people. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Forgive 70x7. If you brother strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left. If he sues for your coat, give your cloak as well. For my kingdom, Jesus says, is in the reconciliation of all peoples. A more perfect union.

This, we believe, was Jesus' pursuit when he surrendered the throne of heaven, his equalities with God, and humbled himself taking the form of a slave, and obediently sacrificing his very being for the sake of the reconciliation of his people. Not just to God, but to each other. Our sacred text reminds us that we are one body, in one spirit, and this is where we find the one kingdom.

Friends in Washington, on this July 2nd the reading of this letter precedes an invitation for this congregation to come to the Lord's Table, the Sacrament of Holy Communion, in which we will partake of Jesus' signs of sacrifice. We will remember all of what he gave so that we might come to this banquet. And yet as we approach this banquet we are aware of how tempted we are to divide even ourselves. The table of Christ is as open as we wish it to be. And yet we are mindful of who we have held back from this table – people of different color, different opinion, different lifestyle, different orientation, different cultures. We have ceased to ask for our own ancient paths, we have too little listened to our Master's voice, we have like lost sheep chosen the paths of division and prejudice. So it with our own blemish, our own blindness to our ancient ways, our vulnerability to NOT repeat OUR sacred past – that we humbly call out to the halls of government and invite our political leadership to join us as we seek to, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "reason together." For the kingdom of heaven is in our midst – not just around this marbled table, but throughout the marbled halls of Washington.

**“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”**

“What is truth?” Pilate asked. Friends in Washington, let us reason together over this question. Let us together seek out the ancient paths and consider the ancient texts – and wonder perhaps if the truth is found in the fabric of our human connection – the tapestry of being equal children of God – the common pursuit of liberty and justice for all. Let us imagine that the truth is not in unbudging division and intractable partisanship and the demeaning references and treatments of foes. We cannot tolerate this in ourselves. Time affords us no such luxury. Let us not repeat the mistake of proconsul Pilate who likely imagined that his Roman eagle would preside forever and that the wounded rabbi was destined for death. How could he have imagined that the eagle would someday collapse and fall and the rabbi would someday awake and ascend. American civilization will of course someday fall, friends in Washington, but let us not hasten its demise. Let us be about Lincoln’s great dream of a long enduring nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal. Let history record we had re-dedicated ourselves to the mission that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

And we who come to this table must be the first to take up the charge. And we do so first with our confession that we, like the apostle of long ago, are the chief of the sinners. We have failed to ask for our own ancient paths and departed from the ways of our Master. We have consciously and unconsciously kept our brothers and sisters from the liberty and justice of this table. Let us reason together, friends in Washington. So let us in our common humanity seek the kingdom in our midst. And let us like those men of Gettysburg and the rabbi of Nazareth not shrink from the sacrifice required to preserve the fabric that holds us together. That we the People, in Order to form a more perfect Union may set aside our petty differences and find in each other the kingdom of heaven and with it Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.



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Church of the Palms

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