

Remembering the Price of Freedom
Sermon on 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, July 2, 2006

On this date one hundred and forty-three years ago, in a small town in southeastern Pennsylvania, the army of the North under General Robert Meade was clashing fiercely with the Confederate army under General Robert E. Lee. More men died or were injured over the course of the three-day battle than in any other conflict on American soil. At the height of the fighting, which lasted from about four p.m. until just after dark, it is estimated that a man was killed or wounded at a rate greater than one every second.¹ In the battle's bloody aftermath, the town's residents tended the wounded and dying, welcomed soldiers' relatives, shipped out the dead, rebuilt shattered barns and bullet-pierced homes. In November they extended hospitality to thousands more—the people who came to witness the dedication of the new soldiers' cemetery and get a glimpse of the president who had been invited to make the ceremony's closing remarks.² This is what Abraham Lincoln said:

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated 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. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above

¹ “The Battle of Gettysburg” from Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Gettysburg#_note-0.

² “Lincoln at Gettysburg” from Abraham Lincoln Online at <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/sites/gettysburg.htm>.

our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, 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.

Lincoln proved to be wrong on one point: the world did not fail to take notice of that occasion, nor has it forgotten what was said on it. Indeed, the Gettysburg Address stands as one of the greatest speeches in all of history. But have we forgotten what the soldiers who died there did?

Our task, said Lincoln, is to remember the price of freedom. And beyond the task of remembering is the task of dedicating ourselves to the “unfinished work” of “the great task remaining before us”—the work of “a new birth of freedom” for which brave men and women have ceaselessly given their “last full measure of devotion.” It is the dedication and devotion of soldiers and sailors, of airmen and Marines to this vision of freedom’s new birth that explains the roll of honored dead who populate the fields of places like Flanders and Normandy and Arlington. It is the dedication and devotion of young men and women from the boroughs of New York City and the farms of Iowa and the ranches of Texas and the beaches of California to this vision of freedom’s new birth that explains the roll of honored dead who died in the forests of the Ardennes and Guadalcanal and Viet Nam. It is the dedication and devotion of the children of shopkeepers and teachers, engineers and secretaries that explains the roll of honored dead who perished in the slums of Mogadishu and Baghdad.

It is America’s children who pay the price of freedom. It is the young and the swift and the strong who pay the price of freedom. It is the Eagle Scout and the Prom Queen, the running

back and the actress, the book worm and the math whiz who pay the price of freedom. It is Blacks and Whites, Hispanics and Asians, American Indians and Pacific Islanders who pay the price of freedom. It is our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our husbands and wives, our mothers and fathers who pay the price of freedom. It is the unfinished task, the unfulfilled dream, the unvanquished hope, the unspoken love that pays the price of freedom.

It is for us, the living, to remember and to lament.

Upon another battlefield in a time long ago and a place far away, a young warrior stood to remember and to lament. “O, how the mighty are fallen,” David cried when he heard the news of the death of his king. The “glory of Israel”—Saul and his son, Jonathan—lies slain upon the heights of Mount Gilboa. These great men, “swifter than eagles” and “stronger than lions,” had known the horrors of war, fighting as they had for a small and fledgling people called Israel. Together, father and son had shown great courage in war: Jonathan’s bow “did not turn back, nor [did] the sword of Saul return empty.” Now in death, as in life, “Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely” were united again. “How the mighty have fallen in the midst of battle!”

It is a remarkable expression of a profound grief. Grief over the death of Saul, respected father, mighty warrior, honored king. Grief over the death of Jonathan, dutiful son, valiant soldier, noble prince, dearly beloved friend. The words of David’s lament are “simultaneously intimate and public,”³ expressing the depths of his very real private pain over the death of Jonathan, a bright and fiercely loyal friend who had everything to live for, as well as the heights of his regard for Saul who had served his country as king.

I agree with Walter Brueggemann that “this poem is a useful model for public grief among us” and that “We have nearly lost our capacity for such grief.”⁴ Brueggemann suggests

³ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 217.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

that this near loss is a result of our preoccupation with illusion. As a society, we are deeply “engaged in self-deception, pretending that everything is ‘all right.’”⁵ Perhaps there are no greater practitioners of the craft of self-deception today than the White House and the Pentagon. In a conflict meant to bring freedom and democracy to a country that has known only a savage tyranny of late, the cost of war is carefully hidden: announcements concerning the number of American service members killed are muted; readings of the names of those killed are censored; photos of flag-draped coffins returning home are banned from the evening news and newspapers.

Remembering the price of freedom demands the truth, and the truth is that liberty is bought at a very dear price. Scores of thousands, nay hundreds of thousands, of men and women—the sons and daughters of America—have paid the ultimate price so that we may enjoy the inestimable blessings of liberty: the freedom to speak, the freedom to gather, the freedom to worship, the freedom to pursue happiness as accords with our best interests. Our freedom has been purchased at great cost on the commons of Lexington and Concord, on the fields of Antietam and Manassas, on the beaches of Normandy and Iwo Jima. Let us never forget.

But a yet greater freedom was purchased at an even dearer price on a hill in a far distant land. That freedom—from the tyranny not of men, but of sin—was won on the cross of Calvary. It cost but one man his life, the life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Upon that cross the Lamb of God fought and defeated the forces arrayed against him, and against you and me: the forces of sin and death. And though Jesus died, our cry is not, “How the mighty are fallen,” for God has raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand of God. Our cry is “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12). Our cry is “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Rev. 4:8). Our cry is “Hallelujah! For the lord our God the Almighty reigns.

⁵ Ibid., 218

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory” (Rev. 19:6). The death and resurrection of Jesus is our new birth of freedom. Let us then be dedicated to the unfinished work of praising God. Let us be devoted to the great task of worshiping God. For to praise and worship the God who saves us in Christ Jesus is to remember the price of freedom.