Of, By and For the People

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Our Civil War is the Continental Divide in United States history. We were a different nation after it than we had been before it. This is shown at the very level of grammar: before the Civil War, one would say "the United States *are*... "; after the war, we say, "the United States *is*...". The structure of our constitution and the relationship of the states to the national government were changed by the Civil War Amendments (Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth) which not only outlawed slavery and guaranteed the former slaves the right to vote, but, more importantly, required that the states and local governments respect due process of law and equal protection of the laws.

Riding, guiding and trying to make sense of these cataclysmic upheavals in our national fabric was the man whose bicentennial we celebrate today, Abraham Lincoln. It is sometimes said that he was an ordinary man who happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. I am skeptical of the idea that history is made by great men, but the more you study the Civil War and the events leading up to it, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this country would not exist today were it not for the shrewdness, fidelity and vision of his leadership.

It is that last quality, Lincoln's transcendental vision of America, that I want to lift up this morning. Specifically, I want to take this famous phrase from the Gettysburg address, a phrase whose fine cadences I rearranged in the title to this talk, to determine where it comes from. What we will see is the development of the idea of government of the people by the people and for the people.

In what I have to say, I will be drawing from a book by Garry Wills entitled *Lincoln At Gettysburg: The Wiords that Remade America*, published in 1992[1], way back in the last millennium, but I think it holds up well. Wills examines the history of things as diverse as the garden cemetery movement and the history of the funeral oration to put the Gettysburg address in context, but his main point is that in these 250 words, Lincoln redefined America.

Along the way, Wills has a bit to say about Lincoln and transcendentalism. Some of you may know that Lincoln borrowed the phrase "of the people, by the people, for the people" from the radical abolitionist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. I have spoken in previous sermons how ironic it is that we UUs now hold Parker so close in our bosoms, who in his own time Parker was practically run out of Unitarianism on a rail, and set up shop independently in downtown Boston, where he attracted crowds larger than the conventional Unitarian ministers of his day.

But looking into it a little deeper, I discover that Parker's phrase has earlier roots in the rhetoric of another great Massachusetts orator, Daniel Webster.

Let us visit the floor of the United States Senate in 1830. Sectional conflict was already at the forefront of national politics. The abolition movement was just gaining steam, but the South was not fighting that but was fighting against tariffs that protected Northern commerce, but fell very heavily on Southern planters. Charleston's own John C. Calhoun had come up with the idea that a state could just declare null and void any enactment of Congress with which it disagreed, though, since he was at the time Vice President, Calhoun did not argue his own idea but had it argued on the Senate Floor by South carolina's Robert Hayne. On the second day of debate, Daniel Webster rose to give his second reply to Hayne's theory of nullification. Here is part of what he said:

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[1]Wills, Garry, *Lincoln At Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, (New York: Simon & Schuster) 1992

"This leads us to inquire into the origin of this government and the source of its power. Whose agent is it? Is it the creature of the State legislatures, or the creature of the people? If the government of the United States be the agent of the State governments, then they may control it, provided they can agree in the manner of controlling it; if it be the agent of the people, then the people alone can control it, restrain it, modify, or reform it. ... the doctrine for which the honorable gentleman contends leads him to the necessity of maintaining, not only that this general government is the creature of the States, but that it is the creature of each of the States severally, so that each may assert the power for itself of determining whether it acts within the limits of its authority. It is the servant of four-and-twenty masters, of different will and different purposes and yet bound to obey all. This absurdity (for it seems no less) arises from a misconception as to the origin of this government and its true character. It is, Sir, the people's Constitution, the people's government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people. The people of the United States have declared that the Constitution shall be the supreme law.[2]"

Under divine right theory, God bestows on the king the right to rule his subjects. Whence comes this governmental authority in a democracy? Webster's answer is that it comes from the people, as against Hayne's argument that it comes from the individual states. Webster is saying that if any state individually has the power to nullify a law passed by Congress, we have no government. Sovereignty must reside in the people as a whole.

This may seem like an obvious proposition to us 150 years after the Civil War, but it was by no means obvious 30 years before. The relation of the states to the federal government was just being worked out.

Now on to Theodore Parker Parker was a fierce abolitionist and a Transcendentalist. In January I spoke about his most famous sermon, "the Transient and Permanent in Christianity" (1841), the one which caused him to be shunned by his Unitarian colleagues. In that sermon, Parker contrasted an ideal Christianity, the religion Jesus was trying to preach, with the corrupted Christianity of the church. He tried to look beyond the transient forms of the religion, the Bible passages, the liturgies and dogmas and creeds, to the living heart of it.

When he turned his mind to politics, he saw a similar distinction. The Declaration of Independence declared as a self-evident truth that all were created equal. This was the ideal. The Constitution, with its compromises protecting slavery, he saw as the corrupted form. As Garry wills notes, "Parker drew his all-important theological-political analogy: as Jesus is to the Bible, (the ideal to the limited reality), so is the Declaration to the Constitution. Listen to what Parker wrote in 1856:

By Christianity, I mean that form of religion which consists of piety – the love of God, and morality – the keeping of His laws. That is not the Christianity of the Christian church, nor of any sect. It is the ideal religion which the human race has been groping for.... By Democracy, I mean the government over all the people, by all the people, and for the sake of all.... This is not the democracy of the parties, but is that ideal government, the reign of righteousness, the kingdom of justice, which all noble hearts long for, and labor to produce, the ideal whereunto mankind slowly draws near. Here is the American progamme of political principles: All men are endowed by their Creator with certain natural rights; these rights can be alienated only by the possessor thereof; in respect thereto all men are equal.... But the means to that end, the Constitution itself, is

[2]Webster, Daniel, Second Reply to Hayne January 26-27, 1830 Source: Shewmaker, 113-121, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~dwebster/speeches/hayne-speech.html

by no means unitary; it is a provisional compromise between the ideal political principle of the Declaration, and the actual selfishness of the people North and South."[3]

In other words, Parker was able to contrast the sadly divided America in which he worked and struggled with an ideal America, much as he contrasted the secular world in which he lived with the heavenly kingdom preached by Jesus. It was this distinction between the ideal and the real in the concept of the nation, according to Wills, which was the greatest consonance between the ideas of Parker and those of Lincoln, and is more significant than the actual phrase which carried that idea.

Now that phrase was used by Parker in many of his speeches and writings, and it is impossible to tell which one Lincoln may have been familiar with. Lincoln's law partner and later biographer, William Herndon, was a great devotee of Theodore Parker, and was constantly commending the preacher to Lincoln. But we have no record of what Lincoln actually read. But Parker's contrast between the ideal equality of the Declaration and the corrupted reality is echoed in Lincoln's thought including the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural.

Lincoln would part company with Parker on whether this ideal of equality was the highest value. Parker and most abolitionists were prepared to sacrifice the country for the sake of the ideal of equality. For Lincoln, preservation of the Union was paramount. Government of the people, by the people and for the people meant government of the whole United States. It was on this that he staked his political career. And it was this which he accomplished, in the end, though the price paid for it was higher than anyone would have thought.

He would never countenance the idea that the Confederacy was a foreign power. He insisted that it be referred to in terms of rebellion. He saw himself as putting down a rebellion, as Washington and Jackson had done in their time.

Secession of the slaveholding states had been a threat for decades. The Constitution is silent on the right of a state to withdraw from the whole. The Republican party was based partly in Northern Abolitionist sentiment, which, as we have seen, was largely willing to let the South leave the union and say "good riddance." When South Carolina actually voted to secede, in December, 1860, it was after and in response to Lincoln's election but several months before he was to be inaugurated. The sitting President, Buchanan, held the position that secession was illegal, but that it was also illegal for the Federal Government to use force against a seceding state.

Lincoln, as we know, felt differently. Though he shrewdly maneuvered the South into firing the first shot, he was clearly prepared to use force to maintain the Union. His constitutional justification for this was slim; it was based on the oath of office he took to uphold and defend "the constitution." But "the constitution" he was defending did not in explicit terms prevent secession.

So in effect, Lincoln staked everything on his transcendental ideal, his vision of an America which had never existed in reality. Ideals, of course, are wonderful; we can't live without them. But you have to wonder what it must have been like for a very intelligent and decent and sensitive man to encounter the bloody reality of the cost he was exacting from the people he led in the pursuit of those ideals.

Lincoln the lawyer knew that there is only so much in a case that a lawyer can control. You do the best you can, you make the best calculations you can, and then there is always a part of it which is out of your hands.

This led Lincoln to speculate about God's role in all of this, as we heard in our opening words, words which he further refined in his Second Inaugural.

So when he got to Gettysburg, Lincoln could see the entire cost of his ideals laid out

[3] Parker, "The Present Crisis" (1856) quoted in Wills, pp. 108-09

before him in the form of Union dead. It was necessary for him to articulate the meaning of what they were doing, so that the dead would not have died in vain. He starts with the founding fathers; he finds the root idea of America in the twin notions that it was "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." There is that transcendental ideal, the gossamer ray of sunshine which he shines on the mud and the blood of the battleground. For he then says that the war is a test as to whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. Is the glue of our shared ideals sufficient to overcome the centrifugal force of sectional interests? Can the brightness of the ideal lift the nation form the mud of shattered lives and economic ruin? He then goes on to the honor due to the dead, and ends with the peroration which every schoolchild has graven on their hearts, calling for a rededication "to the great task remaining before us ... that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

Friday night I heard a professor hold forth on Lincoln's rhetoric, and he said that the stress when you read this phrase should be on the word "people" rather than on the prepositions. That may be, but I think the prepositions are important. Government "of the people" means it is the people who are being governed. Government "by the people" means that it is also the people who are doing the governing. The people, in other words, are both the subject and the object of government. And "for the people" means that the people are the purpose of government.

The roots of the democratic ideal which Lincoln articulated so well are found in many historical sources such as ancient Athens, the Magna Carta and the British Parliament, but it is also found in the regime of Congregational Churches set up by the Puritans in New England. The Mayflower Compact of 1620, signed just a few miles from here, set out the idea of self-governance, and the Cambridge Platform of 1648, declared the right of a church to be established without the permission of king or bishop, but simply on the consent of the congregants. Without the institution of free churches, American Democracy would never have been born.

The transcendental ideals on which Lincoln and Parker thought America founded were equality and liberty. The transcendental ideal on which a congregational church is founded is covenant. Covenants in the Bible are between God and humans. But the covenant which bound a New England Congregational church together is between humans in the presence of God. And in turn, Lincoln's conception of what bound America together has been called a covenant.

Covenants typically are expressed in forms of words, such as a covenant statement in the by-laws of a church or the vision statement recited in the Sunday service, but these are only allusions to the covenant, as the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The covenant of the church is the sum total of all the reasons that any of us has for getting out of bed on Sunday morning and coming down here to be with our fellows, and in the long run, the reasons for wishing the church not to perish from this earth.

The bonds which hold the church together go through periods of strain from time to time; I understand that this church was riven by factions only a few years ago. I have had experience with disagreements which arise in church polity, and while they were minuscule compared to the factionalism that Lincoln faced, I have certain sympathy with him. And these conflicts are ultimately resolved, if they are, by everyone realizing that they have a greater stake in the ongoing whole than in their own position.

So we get around to our commitment to the whole, and that brings up that this is not only the celebration of Lincoln's bicentennial, but the kickoff of the church's stewardship campaign. There is something transcendent about the idea of a church: we are a community based on love, we try to respect everyone's inherent worth and dignity. Yet the church is constantly coming up against gritty reality. As I said last week, universal unconditional love is contrary to our natural instincts. In order to live our ideals, we need to call on the better angels of our nature.

And when it comes to financial support, sometimes the spirit is willing but the budget is weak. I recognize that there are those among us who have given, in Lincoln's words, the last full

measure of devotion, pledging as much or more than they can afford. There are others whose devotion has not reached the point where they are ready to commit substantial support, who content themselves with a few dollars in the plate on Sunday and an occasional check. And of course in this economy, there will be those who can no longer afford the level of support they have been giving in the past.

I hope that when you get the letter from the pledge committee you will think about your own measure of devotion to this place which is, like the country of which it is a part, always an imperfect approximation of its ideals. Confronted with a gap between our highest ideals and the gritty, messy, complex realities, we can retreat into cynicism, or we can do what Lincoln did, put all our muscle mind and sinew towards making the gap a little smaller, towards bringing the world a little closer to our ideas of it. 150 years ago, with the help of a visionary President, we crossed the great divide; we no longer say, "the United States *are* ...", but rather, "the United States *is* ...". With Lincoln, we forged a new nation. We have traveled a long road as a country from 1857's Dred Scott decision that descendants of Africans could not be citizens to having a descendant of Africans in the White House. Our gratitude to this gangly, awkward geek from Illinois – I mean Lincoln – knows no bounds. And for this house of meeting in this little corner of the country, thrust out into the ocean on the Easternmost promontory, let us breathe the bracing air of a new birth of freedom and dedicate ourselves to the covenant of this church, which like the country is of the people, by the people and for the people, that it not perish from the earth. Amen

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Reading:
at one of the darkest moments of the war, [Lincoln] penned the following "Meditation on the Divine Will." It was written, as his secretaries, Nicolay and Hay, said, "While his mind was burdened with the weightiest questions of his life. … It was not written to be seen of men." Here is what Lincoln wrote about the religious meaning of the war.

"The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to affect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."

Gettysburg address
Four score 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 battle-field 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 can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above 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.