

Lincoln, Douglass, and Love
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Reading

from “What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?” by Frederick Douglass, a speech given on July 5, 1852 to the Rochester (New York) Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society:

Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

Douglass then quoted from Psalm 137:

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”

Sermon

It is, as you know, Valentine’s Day!

The origins of Valentine’s Day are a little murky, but two things are somewhat clear. First, it was this very time on the calendar that the ancient Roman festival Lupercalia was celebrated – kind of a matchmaking festival of love and sometimes marriage. Second, in the tradition, so to speak, of the Christian church turning a pagan festival into a religious holy day, the day marks the date of execution in the fourth century of a priest named Valentine – hence “Valentine’s Day”. One of the stories or legends has it that Valentine had been imprisoned for illegally marrying Christian couples and then while in prison wrote a letter to the daughter of his jailer who he had healed of blindness, and signing the letter “From your Valentine.”

It is that story which gives me my starting place this morning: Love breaking down or reaching over or through prison walls. The metaphor is clear: prison walls of selfishness and ego, prison walls of narrow self-interest. And aren’t we all in a sort of prison when we fail to love, fail to reach beyond our narrow self-interest to others, to tenderly care for our dearest ones, to help and heal anyone?

So this has to do with all kinds of genuine love: From romantic love, to love within families and among friends, to the love which seeks justice, breaking down walls of hate and inequality.

Love is manifest in the lives of some on a bigger stage than in the modest lives most of us lead.

Lincoln for example. His birthday was this past Friday. Yes, we know that Lincoln was a politician whose motives were mixed when it came to the Civil War and abolition. Were his actions actually just all about saving the union – emancipation one means toward that end? Or was ending slavery (he did hate slavery, we know this from his own words) always his first priority – saving the union a means to that end?

Perhaps we will never know for certain. But I would name his service to the nation and above all emancipation as acts of love. For which he risked his political life and, in the end, gave his very life.

All this said, I want to spend more of my time this morning talking about Frederick Douglass and love.

Douglass, born a slave, never knew his actual birth date, but chose to celebrate it on February 14; and this date, along with the date of Lincoln's birth, is the reason that historian Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History announced in 1926 that the second week of February would be "Negro History Week" – which eventually became Black History Month.

Douglass was not a politician. An escaped slave, he was an orator and an activist. He was also a Christian, deeply steeped in scripture, from the Hebrew prophets to the life and ministry of Jesus. Yet he never hesitated to excoriate – including in one of his most famous addresses from which we heard this morning – the Christian church of his day for too often upholding the institution of slavery rather than condemning it, as he believed scripture demanded. As D.H. Dilbeck writes of that speech in *Frederick Douglass: America's Prophet*:

Douglass condemned the American church, in the North and South, for remaining "the bulwark of American slavery." Christian ministers throughout the nation "have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system," Douglass said. In doing so, they preached an abominable faith that "makes God a respecter of persons, denies his fatherhood of the race, and tramples in the dust the great truth of the brotherhood of man."

Douglass drove home his point, as Dilbeck puts it, by quoting Isaiah and Christ, each in their own way chastising oppressors and evil-doers.

But like the prophets of old, and certainly like Jesus, Douglass's faith and message was rooted in love. Quoting Dilbeck once more:

Douglass aspired to speak to America as Isaiah and Christ once spoke – with words of rebuke and warning, exhortation and encouragement, grace and liberty, hope and truth.

Which he did for decades. Including in that powerful Independence Day speech and in particular in the powerful passage from that speech we heard earlier, vividly comparing the plight of the enslaved in America to the exiled Israelites in Babylon – made by their captors to sing in a land not their own.

Douglass of course hasn't been alone over the centuries in our nation. Our best leaders throughout our history, Black and white, women and men, have spoken with equal passion and clarity:

Speaking at their best from a place of love for all, speaking words of rebuke and warning as necessary – naming injustice, naming the consequences for our nation of injustice – *and* also speaking words of exhortation, encouragement, grace, liberty, hope, truth – naming the good that rests in all, naming the possibilities for our nation if and when we more fully heed Lincoln's "better angels of our nature".

All coming from love, love which reaches across the prison walls of ego and narrow self-interest, as I put it earlier, reaches across boundaries of whatever sort, reaches to others however different they may be from us (whoever we are), love which reaches for justice, for a promised land that can be, Dr. King's "beloved community".

Love that is not something sentimental and feel-good – more than fine as far as it goes – but love which emerges from a realization that our common humanity is far deeper and wider than any of the usual ways we categorize ourselves by color, ethnicity, gender identity, political party, religion, and on and on.

When I was in elementary school as Valentine's Day approached we were encouraged to send Valentines to classmates. But my recollection is that we were not told (as students were told when our kids were in school) that we had to send Valentines to every classmate. We could choose.

How painful if you received fewer Valentines than others.

Naturally enough, in life we have our dearest ones to whom we give special gifts of love. But at the same time there is, or ought to be, another level of love that is universal. This is the love of the mystics, the love Jesus preached and lived: healing without reference to status, hanging out with the poor and rejected, reaching out to "the least of these". This is the universal compassion for all beings taught by Buddha.

This is, in my book, the truth of our lives.

And the challenge.

Can we love everyone – *everyone* – even as we hold to account those who hurt and harm and hate?

I think until we do, we will find ourselves still in a sort of prison, or in exile echoing the mournful lament in the Psalm we heard earlier, in exile from one another, in exile from the experience of life's unity, in exile from the experience of God by whatever name, in exile from love.

May it be otherwise. For each of us. For all of us together.

May it be so.