

*2007 Fall Congregation*

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I hope that all of you graduates are feeling a sense of deep satisfaction today. You deserve it. Congratulations really are in order; all those hard choices of classes, difficult assignments, hair-raising exams – they are behind you. Well done!

But I also hope that you are feeling a little uncertain too. I hope that you don't think that a big hurdle being crossed, you are now on the race to the finish line. Life has a habit of kicking up surprises – some of them wonderful and some of them heartbreaking. All that any of us can ask is that when the opportunities come our way, or the problems mount, we have found or created the internal resources needed to handle them as best we can. We can't make uncertainty go away. We can't take the risk out of life.

For me, one of the greatest models of a how to seize opportunity and to handle defeat is Abe Lincoln. He has fascinated me for a long time, ever since in grade nine I had to memorize the

Gettysburg Address. You know... “Four score and seven years ago...”.

Last year I read a marvelous Lincoln biography by Doris Kearns Goodwin. It is called “Team of Rivals” and I recommend it highly. Many of us probably know the outlines of Lincoln’s career. Brought up in the backwoods of Illinois with almost no formal education. A self-taught country lawyer. Unexpectedly became President of the United States when he slid up the middle of a split vote at the Republican Convention of 1860. At first a cautious opponent of only some elements of slavery, he became a committed foe. Finally, he had to lead his country through a bloody civil war. At his moment of triumph he is assassinated in Ford’s theatre by a disaffected Confederate loyalist.

Even the outline is a great and moving story. But delve down a little deeper and there is so much more to learn. Of course, being

beneficiaries of a university education, you already know that. Dig deeper in any subject and there is always more to learn.

Abe Lincoln was not a conventionally happy man. He grew up poor in a tough environment. He was notoriously clumsy with women. His marriage was troubled; his wife chronically disturbed. He lost his first bids at election as an Illinois congressman. His young son, Eddie, died from tuberculosis in 1850. Later, during some of the most difficult days of the civil war, when it still looked like the Union would fail, Lincoln lost a second son, Willie, to typhoid fever. Lincoln felt the burden of office during the war to a frightful extent; he was constantly described as having the saddest face imaginable.

And yet. And yet... Lincoln was also a brilliant and consistently humorous raconteur. He loved the theatre and found great solace in immersing himself in plays. He was capable of the deepest friendships. Above all, he inspired loyalty – even, or perhaps

especially, among those people who began by discounting or even despising him. That quality is what I want to focus upon today.

The quality of leadership that Lincoln possessed. We can't all be Abe Lincolns. Perhaps none of us will ever be tested in the ways he was tested. But we can learn from his ability to inspire loyalty and friendship.

Here is my starting proposition: that Lincoln cared more for respect than for honour. In his own words, at the age of only 23:

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition...Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other [ambition] so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow[s]...by rendering myself worthy of their esteem.

Throughout his life, Lincoln sought to do the right thing as far as he could determine it. He was a person of principle who was also exquisitely forthright. Hence the nickname: Honest Abe.

Lincoln was also a deeply generous person who readily forgave the foibles and mistakes of others. In his Second Inaugural Address,

when he could have basked in the glory of the Union victory, his approach was entirely different. He proclaimed that his government would treat the South with magnanimity and respect. In his famous phrase: “With malice toward none, with charity for all.” Some historians have argued that if Lincoln had survived, the post-war treatment of the South by the United States government would likely have been generous enough to heal the wounds that later opened up with such negative power during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

We can never know. But what is clear is that Lincoln’s magnanimity was not mere rhetoric, for Lincoln acted the same way in his personal relationships. Even when others treated him shabbily, and were disloyal, he remained understanding. He knew that humans were imperfect creatures who could let their own interests cloud their judgment.

The best example is his relationship with Salmon Chase, a man who ran against Lincoln for the Republican nomination in 1860. As he did with all his other rivals, Lincoln put Chase in his Cabinet. A brilliant move. But Chase was proud, haughty and ambitious. All through Lincoln's first term, Chase conspired to steal the nomination from Lincoln for the 1864 election. Not only did Lincoln keep Chase in the cabinet, though confronting him with his disloyalty, Lincoln ultimately appointed Chase to be Chief Justice of the United States – simply because Lincoln thought that Chase was the best person for the job. In so doing, Lincoln had to overlook three close friends and advisors who each sought the Chief Justiceship.

In this story, we see not only Lincoln's generosity of spirit, and his commitment to principled decision-making, we also see his ability to assess motives and to find the ways to draw out the best in those around him. When the opponents of Chase's nominations angrily confronted Lincoln, this was his reply:

Now I know meaner things about ...Chase than any of those men can tell me, [but] we have stood together in the time of trial, and I should despise myself if I allowed personal differences to affect my judgment of his fitness for the office. (pp. 679-80)

Lincoln's judgment was sound. Soon after his appointment, Chase led the Supreme Court in effectively overturning one of the most ignominious decisions in the Court's history – the infamous *Dred Scott* case wherein the Court had determined in 1856 that a slave could not sue for his freedom. Chase presided over the swearing-in of a black lawyer to practice before the Supreme Court: a symbolic reversal of the old slave practices that could not have been more powerful.

Delving into the story of Abe Lincoln points to three ways of looking at our opportunities in the world that I find helpful. First, that we should not be afraid of principled decision-making.

Weathering dissent, rejecting the mere currying of favour, does not make one a chump; it shows enormous strength. Second, that



adopting a magnanimous stance in the face of human frailty is likewise not a sign of weakness but of confidence. Third, that magnanimity can also help one to draw out the best in human motivation, encouraging people to believe that they have the will and the ability to accomplish difficult goals.

These approaches to life engender respect; and that is worth far more than wealth, position, titles and honours.

Now none of this is new, of course. Lincoln's approach to leadership has been described in different cultures for millennia. From Taoism and Confucianism to Christianity, the concept of "servant leadership" has been a thread in many religious traditions. But Lincoln shows us that the same strand is present in powerful secular traditions as well. This great theme of history is by no means exhausted. We find the same threads of principle, magnanimity and seeking the best in human motivation in our own day in people like Nelson Mandela. This tradition of leadership is

alive, if bruised and buffeted by the excesses of some self-serving and unprincipled so-called leaders the world over.

So on this day of great achievement. On this day when you are justly honoured by your family and community, I hope that you graduates will remember Lincoln's words: "I have no other [ambition] so great as that of being truly esteemed of my fellow[s]". That challenge is great, but the rewards are unmeasured. Thank you.