



Nothing New under the Sun?

This issue on “Slavery and Race” is occasioned by the 150th anniversary of the Lincoln presidency and the Civil War—or was it the War between the States? It depends in part on where you live(d). As a junior in high school, I moved with my family from Battle Creek, Michigan, to Arlington, Virginia, transferring in the process from one American history course and textbook to another. It was hardly the same war—neither in the textbooks nor in the classrooms. What was a civil war of liberation from slavery for my Michigan teacher was a war between the states over the issue of states’ rights in my Virginia classroom. Often, in fact, it was “the War of Northern Aggression.”

In another profound way, I could see the difference every day. Public school segregation still existed in the South in those days, so my new school was lily white—totally unlike my experience in Michigan. The next year, when I was a senior, the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. As I have written before, I knew we had a long way to go when I overheard one of my teachers—a gracious white-haired lady known for her sponsorship of Christian organizations in the school—telling one of her colleagues after school on the day the ruling came down, “I don’t care what the Supreme Court says, I’m never going to have one of those damn n*****s in my class.”

In her poem that follows this editorial, Natasha Trethewey laments her own silence in the face of the prevailing racist attitudes in her high school during those troubled years. I recall and confess, too, my own use of racist clichés as a school kid in Detroit. I would have denied being a racist; “Some of my best friends are black,” I would have said—not recognizing even that as a cliché, since it was, in fact, completely true. Still, I was in bondage to a culture in which we thought nothing of calling Brazil nuts “nigger toes” and assumed, with everyone else we knew, that Paul Robeson (the black activist singer who came to Detroit on occasion for rallies and concerts) was a “godless communist” because of his outspoken activities in the civil rights movement and his (I see now) completely justified criticism of the hypocrisy of American society. Even though I knew better even then, I said nothing when acquaintances or family members talked about “darkies” (shades of *Gone with the Wind*) or even “jungle bunnies.” And all of this while, at the same time, perhaps my best friend Herman (he was big and black, where I was small and white) was protecting me daily from attack by the white Myrtle Street gang that roamed our neighborhood. (In delicious irony, what was then Myrtle Street is now

Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, connecting my old corner to downtown Detroit.) Those were highly conflicted years, though they are more conflicted for me now, looking back, than they were at the time.

The conflicts and confusion remain in our society. I still don't tell my friends in Georgia that, according to the family story, my great-grandfather marched with General Sherman through their beloved state, living off of the land at the expense of pretty much everything and everyone else. As a recent German immigrant, Great-grandpa Gaiser enlisted, we have been told, to help earn citizenship more quickly. Was he among those who "sang the chorus from Atlanta to the sea" in the rousing song "Marching through Georgia"? If so, he joined his voice to those shouting, "Hurrah! Hurrah! We bring the jubilee!"—referring, of course, to nothing less than the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus, which was meant to "proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (25:10). Our Civil War was not the first—and certainly not the last—to be given biblical warrant. As we read throughout the Bible, God is clearly in favor of bringing freedom to the captives, but whether God favors scorched earth and "total war" might well be another question.

Nothing is easy. Lincoln's "with malice toward none; with charity for all" seems a quaint relic in American politics, long since left behind in the partisan rants that masquerade in our day as political discourse. (To be fair, Lincoln's lack of malice was not shared by many in his own day either. It seems there never was a golden age of peace and harmony in our past.) As I write this, we have experienced a brief respite from the worst of the tirades—a "gift" brought about by the tragic shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (along with others) in Arizona—but that has already begun to erode. People return quickly to the rhetoric and application of power. For Lincoln, we learn in Allen Guelzo's article in this issue, "democracy" was a "means" (toward "liberty and justice for all"), "not an end in itself." Thus, no majority "could ever be right in trying to veto someone's natural right to liberty"¹—an idea that seems less than self-evident in some of the recent political rhetoric that comes close to asserting that "democracy" means that those who got a few more seats in the legislature than others in the most recent election have been given a "mandate" to do whatever they choose, with no requirement to engage those others in a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," no attempt to determine what that might look like in a sharply divided populace.

Our failure here—and our recognition that it has been ever thus—could lead to a counsel of despair that contributes nothing other than the half-truth (even if a biblical half-truth) that "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9). So, we become resigned to the impossibility of the new, of any genuine breakthrough in our forever compromised world. But we should know better than that—those of us who have learned and seen the power of words to create worlds and who have been

¹Allen C. Guelzo, "Lincoln's Moral Constitution," *Word & World* 31/2 (2011) 144.

called to proclaim such life-giving words again and again, as often as it takes. Words matter, we know, so we would do our country and our world a service by steeping ourselves and others in words that heal. I was stirred fifty years ago by Kennedy's inaugural address ("Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country"); and reading the words of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address ("with malice toward none") inscribed on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington brought literal shudders of joy and wonder every time I entered that temple—which I did often as a young person living then in that area.

"We're better than this," said Astronaut Scott Kelly, Giffords's brother-in-law—even then in space—when he learned of the Arizona shooting. He's right, but, alas, we are also this, and we are even worse than this. Humans remain both wonderful and terrible creatures. So, we who are Christians and preachers have a unique duty and opportunity to continue to "proclaim liberty throughout the land"—liberty from bondage of every kind, including our own bondage to sin and our participation in or capitulation to the various hatreds that can and do afflict us all. Jesus offers forgiveness for the first and a better way than the second. We need to proclaim this as our Jubilee chorus.

Ironically, Lincoln—never an "orthodox" Christian—taunted those who supported slavery by noting that if it is such "a very good thing," why do we "never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself"?² The New Testament, of course, does introduce us to just such a man. Was Lincoln unaware of his inadvertent reference here to a theology of the cross? Apparently. Or he may simply have thought that such a reference to the gospel is beside the point in a conversation about the judgment of the world that God works through natural law. There would be truth in this, but those other truths—that words matter, that living for the sake of the other rather than only for the self-interest of person or party has profound political consequence, that God continues to make all things new—provide powerful motivation for Christians to continue to bear witness to hope in a world easily given over to despair.

Slavery and racism remain—along with other manifestations of sin and terror. But freedom and forgiveness are possible. They come to us first as gift and then as task. We rejoice in the former, and give ourselves to the latter, because nothing else will do.

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²Cited in *ibid.*, 143.