

Emancipating People

A Sermon by Dr. Robert Franklin, President Emeritus of Morehouse College
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
March 17, 2013

Dr. Robert M. Franklin: I wish to thank and affirm the leadership of Dean Scotty McLennan. As he noted earlier, during the 1970's we were fellow students in a clinical pastoral education program on the other coast, at a certain New England University that will go unnamed. All who know and admire Scotty are pleased that he has been for these many years, a towering spiritual, intellectual and moral guide here at Stanford. I bring you greetings today from Morehouse College in Atlanta, the college where young Martin Luther King Junior majored in sociology, and graduated in 1948, the same year T.S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for literature. As president emeritus of Morehouse, I am pleased to spend much of the next quarter here, affiliated with Stanford's Martin Luther King Junior Research and Education Institute, directed by my friend and eminent historian, Dr. Clayborne Carson.

In 2009 it was our great pleasure to welcome Dr. Clayborne Carson and his wife Susan, to Morehouse to provide leadership for the Martin Luther King papers there. In 1985 Dr. King's widow asked Dr. Carson to serve as the chief researcher and editor of Dr. King's papers. You all should know that these volumes are being edited here on your campus by the talented staff, who are good stewards of this world heritage collection. Some of them are here today.

One of my tasks is to support Dr. Carson in ensuring that this national treasure receive the attention and ongoing support that it merits. I hope that each of you and this great University, will do all you can to learn more and support the Institute's work, especially throughout this year.

You should also know that the design of the Martin Luther King Memorial in Washington DC, which you'll see a lot of in August as we commemorate the great march of 1963, is the result of Dr. Carson's advocacy and recommendation, a story that is dramatically laid out in his recently published memoir entitled, "Martin's Dream."

I also wish to acknowledge that my wife, Cheryl Gottley of Houston, Texas, is an alumni of this university, now practicing medicine in Atlanta. Two of my children are enrolled here now, as Scotty mentioned.

I'd like to thank all three of them both for their presence here today, and their steadfast commitment to ensuring that I will help pay for a Stanford education for the rest of my life.

[laughter]

Dr. Franklin: 2013 will be an evocative year for all history experts and buffs. But in fact, all of us will learn a lot from the many monumental anniversaries that will occur this year, and throughout the rest of this decade. Two of the most prominent are the 150th anniversary of the signing of the emancipation proclamation, and the 50th anniversary of the march on Washington that gave us Martin's "I have a dream" speech. The release and the commercial success of Stephen Spielberg's film, *Lincoln*, has already stirred public interest and curiosity, and some controversy about America's past, and her progress over time.

More than entertainment, such cultural texts demand that we revisit and learn from our past. Revisit and learn from our past. Even today, St. Patrick's Day, is a powerful cultural text and moment, celebrating the life of one who at the age of 16 was captured from Roman Britain, and taken to Ireland and enslaved.

After six years, during which his faith grew enormously, he writes, he finally escaped and later went back to Ireland as a great evangelist. He's believed to have died on this day, March 17, in 461 A.D. Of course, the popular legend heralds his use of the three leaf shamrock to instruct Ireland on the doctrine of the Trinity.

Revisit. Learn from the past. I recall Maya Angelou's wonderful words offered during her poem given at President Clinton's inauguration over 20 years ago. She said, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but, if faced with courage, need not be lived again." Even anniversaries, complex as they may be, emerge from a wider context.

The year 1863, 150 years ago, was just one year amidst a period of gathering events that would redefine America, as a nation, and its place in the world. All of those events, all of those years, must be considered in order to assess the significance of our highlighted date, 1863.

Indeed, the latter half of the 19th Century was a period of expanding boundaries, stretching American aspirations and self understanding. Gold nuggets were found in California in 1849. And gold seekers around the world, called '49ers, as a reference to 1849, suddenly began a massive international pilgrimage to California.

While most of the '49ers were Americans, the Gold Rush attracted tens of thousands from South America, Europe, Australia, and China. Suddenly, the West Coast, especially San Francisco, emerged from the dust as a stunningly cosmopolitan terminus focused on prosperity.

The outgoing governor of California, in December, 1862, was Leland Stanford. He was born in New York and became a powerful industrialist with his ownership of the Pacific Railroad. He also served as a U.S. Senator and donated, among the 8,000 acres he and Jane would go on to acquire, his horse breeding farm to establish a college, this college, in his deceased son's honor.

In 1862, the Homestead Act was passed. The federal government provided 160 acres of land to men who had not taken up arms against the Union. Suddenly, a new class of landowners and yeoman farmers was created.

In 1863, West Virginia seceded from Virginia becoming the only state to form by seceding from a Confederate state.

The Pacific Railroad, the spine and the symbol of our emerging transcontinental imagination, was completed in 1869. It constituted one of the most significant and ambitious American technological feats of the 19th Century, following in the tradition of the building of the Erie Canal of the 1820's. The transcontinental line served as North America's vital link for trade, commerce, and travel, joining the eastern and western halves of the United States. It also replaced the Pony Express and added rapid communications with telegraph lines built right alongside railroad tracks.

While all of this was percolating, a cold winter arrived in Washington D.C. The evening of December 31, 1862 found over 4,000,000 enslaved African American and thousands of white abolitionists, awaiting the next morning, when President Abraham Lincoln was to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.

Most of you already know that, technically, only about 500,000 African slaves in the Confederacy were promised freedom by that Act, not all 4,000,000 enslaved in the country at the time. But, that fateful New Year's night, found most of those 4,000,000 watching and waiting for the stroke of midnight. Indeed, this practice of watching and waiting on New Year's Eve gave rise to a much beloved worship service and convention still very much alive in many African American church communities known as the "Watch Night Service."

But signing the Proclamation was not at the top of Lincoln's agenda for January 1st. After his coffee that morning, he welcomed and held a reception for members of Congress, the military elite, and the diplomatic corps. And, after that, the doors were flung open to welcome thousands of revelers right into the White House, all of whom wanted to march up and shake President Lincoln's hand and wish him a happy new year.

Freedom advocates, those back in the churches, who were waiting for January 1, were alarmed by the delay. Telegraphs did not yet signal, "The Act has been signed." They wondered, and especially the pessimists, has Lincoln now reneged on his promise, that promise he made back over 100 days ago, on September 22nd, that, and I quote, "if Confederate states did not return to the Union by January 1st, he would declare their slaves then, thenceforth, and forever free," end quote.

As one interested in the study of ethics, I'm struck by the fact that Lincoln's style of ethical reasoning did not focus simply on, or solely upon, ethical principles or the duty to do what is right, or, as we would say in the field, a deontological formulation. Rather

Lincoln was a consequentialist thinker, constantly evaluating and bargaining and weighing based on the probable consequences of his action.

For, you see, in the one hundred days since his announcement, back in September 1862, he was condemned for fomenting slave insurrection, threatening the American social order. The stock market spiraled downward after he announced that he would sign an emancipation proclamation and there was increased desertion from the armed forces.

Lincoln had a lot to worry about. Harry Holzer, a historian, notes that that concern proved premature. Lincoln had recently assured a delegation of Union men from his own home state, Kentucky, and I quote, that "he would rather die than take back a word of the Proclamation of Freedom," end quote. Ironically, when Lincoln was ready to sign in early afternoon, he discovered a typographical error in the text. It had to be rewritten by a professional scribe. Not until mid-afternoon was the revised scroll ready and, as soon as the annual reception ended, Lincoln quickly headed from the East Room of the White House upstairs to his private office, inspected it, but now...another delay.

As three witnesses in the room in almost breathless silence watched, Secretary of State William Seward, his son, and his private secretary, the President picked up his pen, dipped it in the inkwell, but then, unexpectedly put the pen down, offering nothing by way of explanation. Then he picked the pen up again, held it over the document as before, but once again set it down, not a word uttered.

Could it be that he was uncertain after all? What did it mean? Breaking the quiet, Lincoln finally looked up and explained, "I have been shaking hands since nine o'clock this morning and my right arm is almost paralyzed. If my name ever goes into history, it will be for this act and my whole soul is in it. If my hand trembles when I sign the proclamation, all who examine the document hereafter will say, 'He hesitated!'"

And so, rather than risking a tremulous signature, Lincoln first began massaging his giant hands together, and only when he felt the sensation in them return did he take up the pen one more time, and slowly, firmly wrote that most famous of signatures, "Abraham Lincoln". I hope you'll Google it and take a look at that signature after this service. And then he looked up, he smiled, and he proudly declared, "That will do. That will do."

The proclamation that we celebrate as 150 years old this year was a bold step towards emancipating people, but I like the way W.B. Du Bois, the first African American who earned a PhD from Harvard, framed it, "the Act helped to emancipate democracy."

Even Lincoln's adviser and critic and sometime friend, Frederick Douglas, who had advocated such a Presidential order for some time, observed, "It was not a proclamation of liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof such as we had hoped it would be, but was one marked by discriminations and reservations, but it

was a start. Words on paper, written by a noble and flawed individual, emancipating people. But those words changed the meaning of the Civil War, changed the legal status of black people, and changed America."

Fast forward to 1963, 50 years ago, at exactly this time of year, this season of the Christian calendar, down in Birmingham, a desegregation protest campaign was underway. Dr. King, who had been invited by the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, was incarcerated on Good Friday. There, he wrote the now famous letter from Birmingham jail, an answer to that city's most prominent clergy, who publicized a letter criticizing him and Atlanta for coming to Birmingham to lead a disruptive campaign.

They called him an extremist, an outside rabble rouser. Here at Stanford's Martin Luther King Institute, my colleague and visiting scholar, Clarence Jones, who was Dr. King's lawyer at the time, has written about this extraordinary drama of King seated in the jail with no paper, no pen. They smuggled in a pen. He began to write in the margins of the New York Times, and when he ran out of paper, he wrote on the toilet tissue in his cell.

They were smuggled out and re-typed for him. In that letter King said, "I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham. Even if our motives are at present misunderstood, we will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied with America's destiny."

Dr. King understood that America cannot be America until all are emancipated. King, like Lincoln, was a flawed, conflicted human being, most often inspiring and noble, but at times, surprising incomplete. Yet they both dedicated themselves to emancipating people.

By aligning with the fundamental and highest purpose of life, liberty, God honored their intentions and their agency, and God will honor your intentions and your agency. But in the end and in these closing minutes of this message, it comes down to will your education become a resource and a social force for emancipating people? What will you determine to do, to become even to write, to set people free?

What small act can you initiate today, to align yourself with the larger movements to emancipate people? But, are you emancipated? Are there structures and systems, or maybe habits and hangups that entangle you, that must first be confronted and vanquished? Are your priorities liberating? What is your emancipatory homework for the rest of the week?

In Luke 4, Jesus defines his mission as that of emancipating others. I urge you to re-read it in the privacy of your study, Luke Chapter 4 verse 16, and following. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for He has empowered me to preach emancipation to the

oppressed." This is not a passage that very many televangelists utilize today. I wonder why not?

But Jesus did not and would not ignore the growing wealth inequality in America. The mass incarceration of black and brown youth, pay inequities for women, the arbitrary discrimination against LGBTQ citizens, the omnipresence of guns, the digital divide even here in the Silicon Valley, and the savage disrespect of our environment.

The good news today is that we stand in the tradition of Lincoln, King, Jesus, even St. Patrick, that we are all transformed by God's love and thereby we can have an impact on the world that is utterly disproportionate to our effort by aligning and trusting and surrendering to God's love.

And as Rabbi Halaal reminds us "The world is equally balanced between good and evil, and your next act will tip the scale."

Amen.

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