

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

11/14/10

Faith to Endure

Luke 21:19

In the Spring of 1963 the civil rights movement was struggling to gain traction. Entrenched forces were organized to oppose change in the segregated South. In Birmingham, Alabama the jails were prepared to handle anyone who dared to march. City officials believed they had more jail space than the civil rights movement had people. But one Sunday 2,000 young people came out of the New Pilgrim Baptist Church prepared to march. The line of marchers was five blocks long. The police were shocked to see such a huge crowd of marchers. As the marchers approached the line of police officers and dogs, the notorious Bull Connor walked out to confront them. He then shouted for the fireman to turn on the hoses.

One commentator described what happened next in these words:

The line of young people came close—face to face with Connor and the fireman and police. Then they knelt and prayed. The Reverend Charles Billups stood and shouted, “Turn on your water! Turn loose your dogs! We will stand here til we die!” After a few moments, Billups and the young people walked forward, and the firemen parted for them to pass. Onlookers said it was as if the Red Sea had parted for the children of Israel.¹

The faith of these young people to stand firm in the face of adversity changed the world.

This is the kind of faith that Jesus was calling for in the 21st chapter of Luke. There we find Jesus in the presence of the disciples as they admire the stunning beauty of the temple. Jesus interrupts this idyllic moment with a blunt prophetic announcement. He tells them that this magnificent place of worship will one day be reduced to a pile of rubble. He then points out that the destruction will go beyond the temple. The well-insulated world in which the disciples live will be dismantled, too. There will be political upheavals and cultural conflict. There will be anxiety, struggle, and pain.

Out of this chaos will emerge a different kind of world that God is bringing into being. The new world will be closer to God’s original intentions of a world not based on power, but on love. Jesus promises to give the disciples the faith they will need to get through the tough times that are coming. If they endure in that faith they will have a part in changing the world.

This vision of a different kind of world was firmly planted in the hearts and minds of the founders of this church in 1835. They were firm in their belief that God was at work to bring about a world that would no longer be tied to the power structure of slavery. When a community wide gathering in 1837 voted to condemn abolitionists as both dangerous and not Christian, the people of Second Presbyterian knew they were an embattled minority with a hard struggle ahead of them. But they never gave up their vision for a different kind of world. When the Civil War came divisions within Springfield were magnified by the conflict. Second Presbyterian, which had been called the “Abolitionist Church” soon became known as the “Union Church.” The pastor Albert Hale received death threats for preaching sermons questioning the right of Southern states to secede.

One of the members of the “Union Church” in those years was a Congregationalist from New England named Robert Post. He later wrote that the founding of First Congregational Church in Springfield was delayed until after the Civil War because most Congregationalists in this city felt obligated to stand by Albert Hale who had become such a lightning rod for racial justice. They also wanted to make the “Union Church” as strong as possible in its ministry to a community deeply divided by the national conflict.²

I recently received a copy of a letter written by Clinton Conkling to Robert Todd Lincoln. Conkling was thanking Abraham Lincoln’s son for the gift which was used to construct the beautiful chancel stalls of this church. But he also made reference to the atmosphere in the congregation during the Civil War. His letter includes these words:

In 1860 the family of B. S. Edwards were members of Second Presbyterian Church, but soon after for “political reasons” I was told by one who knew they withdrew and went to ... [another] church. This was because the intensely loyal attitude of almost the entire congregation...made the atmosphere uncomfortable.³

Conkling went on to disclose the name of the church where B. S. Edwards could feel more comfortable. But since Conkling asked Robert Todd Lincoln not to divulge that information, I won’t give any names either. The real point is that B. S. Edwards could have gone to almost any other church in Springfield and been warmly embraced by those who were not willing to give up the old world and its slave based economy. People who were bitterly opposed to Lincoln’s presidency were easy to find in Springfield. The letter ends with a postscript reflecting on how different their world was 50 years later. Conkling wrote to his friend, “Now all rise up to do your father honor.”

This world will continue to be changed by those who have the faith to endure.

Endnotes

1. Kyle Childress, *Christian Century*, November 2, 2010, page 21. Childress’ article follows the description by historian Taylor Branch.
2. Robert Post, The First Congregational Church of Springfield, Illinois, was organized in 1867, nearly fifty years ago (1916), from *Historical Data*, Volume 2, C. L. Conkling, pages 354-358.
3. Clinton Conkling letter to Robert Todd Lincoln, October 6, 1915. Robert Todd Lincoln Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I am grateful to Illinois State Historian, Thomas Schwartz, for providing me with a copy of this letter.