

# “Healing the National Divide”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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This past Friday, November 6, marked 160 years since Abraham Lincoln garnered less than 40% of the popular vote to win the Presidential election. That election victory allowed him to become the 16th President of the United States. Serious divisions existed in this nation at the time of Lincoln’s election. After his election, those divisions intensified dramatically. By early February of 1861 seven States had seceded from United States of America to form what is often referred to as the Confederacy. Thirty-nine days after Lincoln was inaugurated as President the American Civil War began when secessionist forces attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina. The fighting raged on for just over 4 years. The country’s death toll was staggering. Estimates put the toll of all who died as a direct or indirect result of the war at well over a million people. The Civil War nearly put an end to the United States. The war also lent credence to Lincoln’s prediction that we heard in our reading this morning. “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher.”

That period of time was, without a doubt, the most divisive time in our country’s history. It was not however, the only time when our country has experienced significant division. In the relatively short span of my lifetime the country has been divided numerous times. In the early 1950’s, the divisions related to unfounded claims by a U.S. Senator that he had a list of prominent U.S. citizens who were “members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring.” The 1950’s and 60’s saw the civil rights movement bring to the surface issues that the Civil War had not resolved. In the 1960’s and early 70’s the nation was divided over involvement in the Viet Nam War. The Watergate Scandal that resulted in the resignation of Richard Nixon was yet another cause of division. And in this century there was the electoral debacle of 2000.

There are some who assert that our country is more divided now than at any time since the Civil War. Whether or not that is the case, I am certain all of us would agree that the level of divisiveness in our country is disturbingly high. The level of divisiveness is so high that it threatens the ongoing existence of our democracy. What is at the base of this division? Some would say the cause is a person who has a position of power and authority. While I can understand how someone could come to the conclusion that a person who has power and authority can sew discord and division, I don’t believe one person creates the divisions. A person who has power and authority can, and sometimes does, accentuate and amplify the divisions that already exist.

I would suggest that much of the division that exists is created by emotions, and one emotion in particular, namely fear. Fear has the capacity to generate tremendous amounts of energy, and that energy often fuels other emotions—emotions such as anger, hatred, greed and jealousy to name just a few. When tremors of fear begin rumbling through a person’s body, the energy that is created may be projected outward. When that occurs, fear can create rifts or even chasms that separate people just as an earthquake can do when it splits the ground and separates one community from another.

Fear is a natural and very necessary human emotion. There are times when fear is appropriate to the situation. At such times fear can save our own life or the life of another. Yet when fear is excessive, unchecked or inappropriate, it can be very destructive and even deadly. Fear can arise as a result of real or imagined threats. An imminent and real danger to our lives, such as a Grizzly Bear charging us, will create a tremendous surge of fear and its accompanying energy to pulse through one’s body. But other things, even things that are totally imaginary, can leave us shaking in our boots as the saying goes. Things such as uncertainty, insecurity, and self-doubt can cause us to become fearful, especially if we perceive the cause of any or all of these to be another person.

In these turbulent times we are living in, fear is present at levels I haven’t experienced in my lifetime—fear of COVID, fear of climate change, fear of economic instability and insecurity, fear of people we don’t know—people who look different, act different, worship different or believe different than we do. Fear is at the base of nationalism, racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, greed and jealousy. Looking back on what led

up to the Civil War it is clear that fear was a major motivator in that conflict. People in positions of power and authority in southern states were fearful that their ability to own slaves was under threat. They were fearful that if slavery was abolished their power would be undermined, especially their power over others. They were fearful that their economic stability and security would diminish, and their self-esteem and self-worth would be undermined.

Today, I see many of those same fears at work. The racism that was at the very core of the Civil War is still pervasive in our country and in our institutions. The greed and the need to have power over others continue to be prevalent in our country today. And the fear of change prevents many people from being able to perceive and act on the issues that are real and significant threats to our lives, including the threats posed by COVID and global climate change.

So as I think about the current state of our country, and I consider the level of fear that is present, I ask myself what will it take to heal the divides that are so prevalent and so intense. Before I go any further, I want to state right up front that I don't have sufficient knowledge or wisdom to know the definitive answer to that question. What I am about to share are my best guesses at what might be needed. Therefore, I encourage you to take what I am about to say not just with a grain of salt but with a shaker full of salt. And I would invite each of us to think deeply about this question and answer it as best we can. I will be very interested in hearing your thoughts about what might be needed to heal the divides our nation is experiencing today.

If fear is a significant factor in our national divides as I have proposed, then it seems to me that we need, at the very least, to recognize and acknowledge the feeling of fear that exists, whatever that fear might be about. We need to recognize and acknowledge the fear, whether that fear is about threats that are real or things that are imaginary, such as unfounded conspiracy theories.

How we deal with our own or another's fears can influence the intensity or even the continued existence of those fears. A child who is fearful of an imaginary creature under their bed that will come out when they are sleeping to eat them is typically not reassured or calmed simply by being told that no such creature exists. Such a child needs first to be listened to. Listening reaffirms for the child that they are worthy of another's attention and caring. Listening creates a time when the bonds of the relationship are confirmed and strengthened. Then comes the challenge of acknowledging the fear while not affirming or encouraging the imaginary cause of the fear. Only when the previous steps have been taken can the child begin to fully receive the comfort and consolation they require.

I use this example not to imply that we ought to perceive others who have fears we don't have as childish. Instead, I use this example to suggest that we need to first put a check on our judgement of the other person, just as we do with a child. Then we need to disarm our own fear, just as we need to do when a child comes to us in a state of terror. When we accomplish those two steps we are more likely to be fully present with the child or with any person. Being fully present is relatively easy with a child we know and care deeply about. Being fully present with an adult, especially an adult who is charged up with emotions, can be significantly more difficult, and sometimes even beyond our ability. None of us has the capacity to adequately address and alleviate all the fears of everyone we encounter. We may, however, have the ability to reduce our own judgements and fears enough to be present with and for another in a way that builds and strengthens a more trusting, caring and compassionate relationship. From my many years working as a psychotherapist, I had many opportunities to observe and experience first hand the power that a trusting, caring and compassionate relationship has to assist in the healing process. I am sure each of you can think of situations where a positive and beneficial relationship enabled healing.

So far I have focused my comments on individuals and relationships between individuals. That is because I believe relationships are where the healing that our country needs must begin. It is also where the long-term work must be done.

Some would say that our work needs to focus first and foremost on structural changes. I don't believe that making structural changes will be sufficient to heal the divides that exist between people. That isn't to say we should ignore or avoid making structural changes. Working to make structural changes—such as changes to laws, rules or practices that disenfranchise some while benefiting others—isn't just important, it is

essential. We need to do our part in that work. That work needs to be done in order for those who have been, and continue to be, denied or injured by an unjust system, and that includes multitudes of people. When we engage in structural change work it will be important for us to remember to attend to how we treat the people we make contact with—those who may have a vested interest in the structures that currently exist, and therefore fears about the structural changes we are calling for. We need to find ways, as best we can, as I mentioned previously, to hear their fears, check our judgements, disarm our own fears and then address their fear as best we can while at the same time being clear that change is needed.

There is a tremendous amount of work that will be required to heal the divides that exist in our country. I will say that I am doubtful the healing will be completed in my lifetime. Some of the divides have existed for hundreds of years. Whether the change occurs in time for me to witness it or not isn't the point. This nation and its democratic form of government has lasted now for more than 240 years. In order for it to last another 100, 200 or 300 years, we will all need to do everything we can to assist the healing process.

The people of this nation have cast their votes and made their wishes known in the election that just occurred. Just as we heard in our Story for All Ages this morning, when all of the crayons in the box are able to be part of making the picture, what emerges is richer, more radiant and more complete than would otherwise be possible. My hope is that our country will now begin the hard work of finding ways to heal the divides that separate us. I hope we will engage in that work so those who just became old enough to vote this year will still be voting and electing their leaders until they reach my age and beyond.

So may it be.