

Better Angels in America's Civil War

by

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150th anniversary of Benjamin Dorr's death

Christ Church, Philadelphia

September 15, 2019

William Shakespeare once wrote, "What's past is prologue."
As William Faulkner saw die-hard demons haunting America, still,
in the mid-20th century, he wrote, "The past is never dead; it's not
even past." [PAUSE] Have you ever wondered how Faulkner would
interpret our national condition today? Odessa? Dayton? El Paso?
Stoneman Douglas? Sandy Hook? Ferguson? Charlottesville?
These place names echo the fratricide of Bull Run. Shiloh.
Chancellorsville. Harpers Ferry. Antietam. Fort Pillow.

We gather here today to commemorate a great American:
the Rev. Benjamin Dalton Dorr, minister of this historic American
church during the nation's greatest crisis, America's Civil War.
Racial slavery and zealous partisanship caused Americans to war
with each other, killing perhaps as many as 300,000 more
American soldiers than all other American wars combined! (Civil
War deaths = 700K - 1M; all other wars = 700K).

I wrote a book about Benjamin Dorr. The book is titled *Pure Heart* ... because Dorr is as much a patriotic hero as is William Wallace, the Scottish freedom fighter Mel Gibson portrayed: *Braveheart*! When I started researching my subject in 2002, I heard then, too, echoes of the American Civil War in the tribal politics and culture wars of our time. As I delved more deeply into mid-19th-century America, those echoes sounder louder and louder during the administrations of George Walker Bush and Barack Hussein Obama.

As the Civil War continues to echo ever more ominously, I contend that America's truest ideals—in that conflict and still now—are enshrined in these monuments to Benjamin Dorr, to Esther Odin Dorr, and to their eldest son, Capt. William White Dorr. Monuments to the Confederacy and its leaders mock America's true ideals. This pastoral father and his son are true heroes. Union heroes. American heroes. Nearly lost to history, those two men, and the monuments to their memory here in Philadelphia, ought to remind us today of what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.” Never more, in the 150 years since the Rev. Dorr's death, have Americans had more need to hearken to his example as we have now.

I mean to be provocative, to the point that you'll feel compelled to read my book – which you may buy in the church's gift shop. ... Truly, though, I mean to be provocative for a serious purpose.

The last words in my book ring even more truly today than they did when I wrote them in 2015:

In the discord of our own day – with politics as partisan and waged as meanly as ever before, with religion polarizing our politics, and amid another protracted war whose cause divides Americans – once again we are at a crossroads in America. [W]ell might we identify with Americans so conflicted and sorely tried a century and a half ago. Like them, we too might recognize, in the hearts of a Union soldier and his father, something of the better angels of our nature that Lincoln had hoped to invoke from the mystic chords of American memory.

I don't expect everyone will agree with my proposition; in fact, a number of people have challenged it, and I welcome that dialogue. I'll speak on this subject for about 45 minutes, after which I welcome your comments and the conversation this subject might elicit.

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I stumbled upon this story about 25 years ago. I was in a flooding basement – helping to salvage the archives of The

Governor's Academy in Byfield, MA, where I teach – when, in one of the large cardboard boxes we were moving to a dry room upstairs, two of my colleagues discovered a collection of letters written by a Civil War soldier to his father.

At first, I was just curious: Who was the Union infantry officer who wrote the letters? I'd assumed that he was a student at the Academy, but I learned that Capt. William White Dorr – commissioned as a 1st lieutenant – was born, raised, and schooled here in Philadelphia—where in 1837, the year of Will's birth, his father became the rector of this church much venerated in the story of America's founding.

Benjamin Dorr was born March 22, 1796 and raised on the north bank of the Merrimack River in Salisbury, MA. Benjamin did not attend nearby Dummer Academy—named for its founder, colonial MA Gov. William Dummer, and known now as The Governor's Academy. And yet, somehow the Academy came to possess a portion of Benjamin's collection of wartime letters from his soldier son, who was killed in action during the Civil War. How the Academy came to possess this trove remains a mystery.

The surviving part of the Rev. Dorr's memorial collection includes 20 of 194 letters he received from his son between

September 1862 and May 1864, while the young officer served with his infantry unit, the storied 121st Pennsylvania Volunteers, in Virginia, Maryland, and PA—fighting at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and in the Wilderness Campaign of May 1864. The collection includes pencil-&-ink sketches drawn by his son and by one of his son's comrades.

In addition to the blue & red felt discs that signify the 1st & 5th Corps to which Will Dorr's regiment was attached during the war, the collection includes also dried cuttings of boxwoods and blooms that preserve in sepia tones something of the father's love for his son – and the romanticism of the young man who clipped them from the gardens of Virginia mansions and pressed them into his letters home.

And it includes one other letter: a nearly poetic correspondence that the old rector would treasure as evidence of the state of his son's soul as he prepared himself and his company, in the spring of 1864, to plunge again into the Virginia Wilderness. I'll not unpack it for you tonight, but the letter is a Gethsemane-like outpouring of that soldier's heart to a woman of his fancy whom he addressed – variously – as

- “The Lady with Brown Hair[,] Dressed in Black with a Red Scarf,”
- as “Ma Bell’ Incognita” (translation, My Mysterious Beauty),
- and as “my dear ‘Evangeline,’” alluding with deliberate metaphoric meaning to the heroine and the emancipationist theme of Longfellow’s epic poem by that title.

Undelivered to that mystery woman, this letter was found among the dead soldier’s belongings, perhaps on his body, and delivered instead to his grieving father.

Some higher purpose seemed then—and now—to attend to Will Dorr’s part in several of the Civil War’s most crucial battles. Uncannily present as he was at those epic scenes, for us there’s a Forrest Gump-like allegorical quality to Will Dorr’s story. In his day, Americans more readily interpreted his experience—as well as their own experiences and the nation’s—in Christian, providential terms.

In December 1862, when Dorr was a 1st lieutenant, his regiment was at the spear point of the only Union brigade to break through Rebel lines in the devastating defeat of the Union attack on Fredericksburg. He survived that inferno.

On the first day of the 3-day battle at Gettysburg, while perilously exposed at the far left end of the thin Union line, Lt. Dorr and his comrades held off two assaults by overwhelming Rebel forces. The 121st suffered losses of 66 percent that day, the 2nd most casualties in a battle by any Union regiment in the Civil War. Their sacrifice bought valuable time for the larger mass of Gen. Meade's army to secure positions along Cemetery Ridge and the Round Tops south of Gettysburg.

On the battle's third day, Dorr and comrades, whittled then from 750 men to about a hundred, stood just behind the focal point of Pickett's Charge, the so-called "high water mark of the Confederacy" on Cemetery Ridge. Gettysburg is the bloodiest battle ever fought in the Americas: at least 51,000 casualties—equivalent to the combined residential populations today of Old City Philadelphia and the neighborhoods of Kensington, Northern Liberties, and Society Hill. Among the 121st's officers, only Lt. Dorr emerged unscathed—a deliverance his comrades interpreted as a mark of his godliness.

Promoted to captain at 26 years of age, Dorr was commanding the regiment when he was killed May 10th, 1864 while leading a charge on a fortified Rebel line atop Laurel Hill

during the Battle of Spotsylvania. This is the last of 194 letters Will wrote to his father from the war front. Written during interludes in the furious Wilderness Campaign—a few lines on May 7th, a few more May 8th, the last few May 9th—this letter was probably recovered by Will’s comrades from his corpse. The stains we see might be Will’s blood.

“Among the pure, [Captain Dorr was] one of the purest,” said one comrade. “[A]mong the brave, one of the bravest; among the noble fellows of the army, one of the most modest, most loved, and most esteemed, he was the idol of his company and of his regiment.” In December 1865, two days after Christmas and eight months after his surviving comrades in the 121st personally witnessed Lee’s surrender to Grant at Appomattox, they and other of his friends and associates erected this monument to Captain Dorr’s heroism.

More than a hundred Philadelphians contributed to the creation of this sublime memorial, including some of the city’s leading politicians, lawyers, and businessmen; daughters, wives, and widows of Union soldiers; and a number of Capt. Dorr’s comrades in arms, headlined by the man who served as Dorr’s divisional commander at Fredericksburg and then the entire

army's commander at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and the Wilderness Campaign: Gen. George Gordon Meade. The monument is "well placed," the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, "in a church where [Capt. Dorr's] name will always be held dear." [PAUSE]

The *Inquirer's* confident prophecy reflects the brightness of those days: The dawn of peace after a grievous civil war. The 13th Amendment's ratification—ending almost 250 years of slavery in America—exactly three weeks before the dedication of this monument ... "well placed in a church," the newspaper proclaimed, "where [Capt. Dorr's] name will always be held dear."

Perhaps that prophecy has held true *in this church* ... though I am certain the *Inquirer* meant that this American hero would be lauded by Americans universally, not just by those in this congregation.

But Captain Dorr has been *forgotten*! Every American school child learns of Benjamin Franklin, among the luminaries buried in this churchyard, but who has ever heard of the young soldier prominently memorialized at the head of this ecclesiastical cradle of American liberty? Why history has forgotten Captain Dorr, and why those mid-19th-century Americans raised him to the

pantheon of America's founding heroes, is vitally important for us ... NOW ... to understand.

That understanding cannot be simply "tweeted"—if I may beg your pardon—as it will take more than 140 characters to explain.

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First of all, we need to understand the role of this church in our nation's founding. Christ Church, Philadelphia, is known now, as it was in the mid-19th century, as "The Nation's Church" because of its ties with many of America's founders during the Revolution and the first years of the Federalist era when Philadelphia was the capital of the United States. It's America's Westminster Cathedral.

- This church served as the house of worship for many members of the revolutionary American Congress, and its rector served as chaplain to that congress.
- In addition to Franklin, 6 other signers of the Declaration of Independence are buried here.
- George Washington attended church here over a period of 20 years—his pew is right *there*(!)

- and the Rev. Dorr's predecessor as rector of "The Nation's Church" officiated at Washington's funeral.

Rev. Dorr baptized his son in the name of that American founding father, Bishop William White.

Capt. William White Dorr was truly an American hero, but in my book – and in the hearts of his compatriots – his father is the main protagonist. *Pure Heart* recounts the story, alongside his son's military service and sacrifice, of the Rev. Dorr's tactful efforts to hold Philadelphia's Christ Church together during America's Civil War. His success in saving "The Nation's Church" parallels Lincoln's far greater but comparable challenge to save the nation.

The Rev. Dorr served as rector of "The Nation's Church" for 32 years. After his death on Sept. 18, 1869, four years after the Civil War had ended, congregants erected also these monuments to him and to his wife, alongside the monument to their son, here at the head of the church, astride the chancel – more prominent than any of hundreds of memorials in this hallowed church. Why, then, did the surviving wartime congregation in this church memorialize Dorr so eminently?

As I studied Benjamin Dorr, I gained appreciation for the tightrope he needed to walk to keep his church together. Conflicts caused by racial slavery threatened to destroy his church – as they did the nation. During the secession crisis of 1860-61, for example, Dorr’s assistant rector, Cameron McRae, returned to his home in North Carolina, and former President John Tyler’s son—Robert Tyler, a member of this congregation—returned to his home state of Virginia and became Registrar of the Confederate Treasury.

During the three decades before the Civil War, some of this congregation’s members would have moved the church from this place—the original site of its founding in 1695—or dissolved it. Why? Because this neighborhood and so many of its surrounding neighborhoods filled during the second quarter of the 19th century with German and Irish immigrants, most of them Catholics—widely feared and scorned then as brutes. Thugs. Devilish infidels. Un-American.

And, this neighborhood and those just south of here teemed then, too, with free blacks and fugitive slaves—the largest black population of any northern city in the United States. This map depicts the proximity, relative to Christ Church, of St. Thomas

African Episcopal Church, Mother Bethel AME Church, and 1st African Presbyterian Church. Mid-century Philadelphia's vibrant but oppressed African American community surrounded Dorr's church, but churches in the City of Brotherly Love were racially segregated then. "There is not perhaps anywhere to be found a city in which prejudice against color is more rampant than in Philadelphia," wrote the escaped slave turned abolitionist Frederick Douglass. "It has its white schools and its colored schools, its white churches and its colored churches, its white Christianity and its colored Christianity, ... and the line is everywhere tightly drawn between them."

Benjamin Dorr did not, it is true, cross that line and advocate for racially integrated churches—though during the war he *did* come to support equal, full-voting membership in the Diocese of PA for black Episcopal churches, such as nearby St. Thomas. He did also resist the *white flight* that would have relocated this church from Old City, with its changing demographics, to a tonier suburb, along with so many other affluent white churches that then made that move. Dorr treasured "The Nation's Church" as – QUOTE – "a sacred deposit committed to our trust, not merely for our own benefit, but for that of future generations." The

church's mission, he insisted, wasn't in Germantown or Chestnut Hill. It was among the people—especially the poor and the needy(!)—*right here!*

Civil war did not deter Dorr in that mission. He knew slavery was wrong, yet he sought to grow this church in the *crucible* of this place. And so he sought to maintain fellowship with conservative, proslavery Unionists who constituted a bloc as weighty and powerful in this church then as they were in the fractious Union coalition at large.

Nothing divided Dorr's congregation, as it divided also the nation – and the North(!), particularly the Keystone State – as much as Lincoln's measured steps toward Emancipation. Pennsylvania's Copperhead Democrats, led by these men in Dorr's church, openly scorned Emancipation in the most racist terms. In early 1863, they established Philadelphia's Central Democratic Club to defend the proposition, among – QUOTE – “the pure principles of Democracy,” that “in the State of Pennsylvania all power is inherent in the White People.” Fanning popular prejudices and fears, these Copperheads curdled the cream of Philadelphia society. They actively obstructed efforts to raise troops to defeat the rebellion. They thought slaveholding

Southerners very fine people, and they sought armistice with them.

On the other hand, Republicans in Dorr's church in December 1862 founded the nation's first Union League, followed soon after by Union Clubs in New York and in Boston, to mobilize support for Lincoln's prosecution of the war and, most controversially, to lobby the Lincoln administration and rally popular support for the enlistment of black soldiers in the Union's armed forces. Horace Binney, a renowned Philadelphia sage and a jurist as renowned then as Joseph Story and Daniel Webster, endorsed the League here in Philadelphia as – QUOTE – “a refuge for loyalty” to the Union. Binney was the Rev. Dorr's most steadfast friend and godfather to his son, Capt. Dorr.

Another historian has criticized Dorr for refusing to speak on the divisive issues of his day, particularly slavery and secession, but she was mistaken. It's true that Dorr refrained from maligning slaveholders. He neither preached abolition nor vilified slave owners and those, South and North, who supported slavery and openly espoused white supremacy. But he denounced slavery, lamented its grip *in* and *on* America, and he challenged proslavery theology. His tact was not equivocation. He did not twist, conceal,

or cloud the truth. And he directly denounced secession as rebellion – “monstrous rebellion,” he called it.

“I was [initially] surprised,” one reader wrote to me, “at the choice of Benjamin Dorr for your extended examination, thinking instead of many abolitionists who asserted their views much more clearly.” It’s a fair point—one also made by an African-American gentleman who pointedly asked, after a talk I gave 3 years ago, right here (!): *Is the Rev. Dorr really worthy of our esteem today?*

I grant the gentleman’s point about Dorr’s diplomacy, but consider the consequence if Dorr had instead preached abolition: we wouldn’t be meeting now in “The Nation’s Church” – or in the United States of America, for that matter – as both places would have torn asunder 150 years ago. Dorr could not then preach *abolition* and keep his historic American church intact. Neither could Lincoln, *by demanding abolition*, hold the nation together AND set slavery on a course of ultimate extinction.

I want to be careful not to make a saint of Benjamin Dorr. Or to undervalue the indispensable roles abolitionists played in making America a more perfect Union, particularly concerning

the advancement of human liberty. After all, our first African American president wrote:

The best I can do in the face of our history is remind myself that it has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise that has created the conditions for liberty. The hard, cold facts remind me that it was...men like Frederick Douglass who recognized that power would concede nothing without a fight.

And yet, what Obama then said of Lincoln's more diplomatic antislavery stance holds true for Benjamin Dorr as well. Obama said:

I like to believe that for Lincoln...it was a matter of maintaining within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas—that we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side, and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we *are* certain, protected from error only by providence.

Rev. Dorr fully supported the war as Lincoln waged it, for Union ... and for *measured* steps toward Emancipation. Holding true to his Unionist and *anti*-slavery principles, without antagonizing divisions that threatened the existence of his

church, Dorr preached for emancipation indirectly, in biblically allusive terms. He preached in parables. I'll give you two examples.

In July 1862, as his son volunteered as a Union infantry officer with the 121st Pennsylvania, the Rev. Dorr donated \$100 – a large sum in those days – to Philadelphia's bounty fund for volunteers, and he preached that Sunday on the biblical psalm "I will pay my vows." Everyone in this church that day, Republicans and Copperheads alike, would have known what Dorr meant. The time had come for him to speak and to act, openly, against the rebellion and its *wrongful* cause. "Now!," Dorr declared—in the very week that Lincoln's signing of the 2nd Confiscation Act had then decidedly turned the war toward Emancipation—"Now!" he said. "I will pay my vows ... NOW!" ... Then, "[w]ith a father's and a pastor's God speed," one of Dorr's close friends later said, he blessed his son's enlistment in that *holy* cause.

I'll read a short excerpt from my book, another example of the Rev. Dorr's tact and the way that he spoke in parables—as did Lincoln, whose parables were earthy and homespun as well as biblical, artfully composed for a citizenry that was largely Christian and working class. For example, here is Dorr preaching

on Thanksgiving 1863, the first national day of Thanksgiving proclaimed by President Lincoln:

[READ pp. 199-200]

Dorr's sermons, like Lincoln's speeches and private correspondence, exemplify an exceptionally temperate faith apart from the partisan appropriation of the "civil religion" with which most Americans then crusaded against each other. Americans had come to view themselves not only as a chosen people...but as God's chosen *NATION*. Rival visions of the nation's Manifest Destiny, though, divided those self-professed chosen peoples and brought them to blows.

Dissenting from that tribal crusading, Lincoln spoke instead of Americans as God's "almost chosen people." (AL, address to NJ Senate, Feb. 1861) He rejected zealotry on both sides – abolitionism, particularly abolitionist *violence*, on one side and Bible-thumping advocacy of slavery's godliness on the other. In his 2nd Inaugural Address, he rebuked both sides: "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God," Lincoln lamented, "and each invokes His aid against the other."

Dorr, too, deplored the hubris on both sides: the righteous certainty with which each side claimed to know, absolutely, the mind of God. He—like Lincoln—hove instead to the Calvinist tenet of God’s almighty and *inscrutable* ways, and he preached a gospel of charity and compromise – principled compromise. He prayed that war might be avoided AND that slavery would cease to grow, eventually ending altogether. And he drew artfully from the Bible in search of common ground—where Americans of good faith might come to stand together.

[PAUSE] ... It IS a *middle*-ground position—and the uneasy balance of that position gives one pause. Critics in Lincoln’s and Dorr’s day, and in history, have castigated them as *unprincipled*, *irresolute*, and *weak*. As the historian Andrew Delbanco writes in his recent book, *The War before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America’s Soul*:

[QUOTE] In recounting the struggle over slavery, we tend to celebrate those who seem bold and prophetic and to *denigrate* those who seem tentative and timid. ... But before dismissing such men as “mediocre, timid, and weak,” one might ask oneself how many of us would welcome such a war [as the Civil War], especially without the knowledge of hindsight? As Lincoln’s anguish...attests, not before the last months of fighting was it clear that the South could be compelled to abandon slavery by force of arms. [UNQUOTE]

When war came, though, “with a father’s and a pastor’s God speed,” the 66-year-old rector sent his 24-year-old son to fight. Neither he nor Lincoln said or believed there were “very fine people on both sides” of American slavery. Neither of them saw *moral equivalence* in proslavery and abolitionist positions. Far from feckless, irresolute, or weak, the Rev. Dorr stood firmly and faithfully in support of the Union and of the war as Lincoln waged it, emancipation included, even unto the most grievous of losses: his son’s death in that cause, killed by a Rebel bullet that pierced his heart.

(This study of Lt. Dorr was sketched by his Philadelphia friend and comrade in the 121st, Harry Lambdin, son of the famed portrait artist, James Reid Lambdin, whose subjects included Lincoln, and younger brother of George Cochran Lambdin, whose subjects included Grant.)

In the wake of their terrible civil war, a time I imagine when many Americans had come to feel chastened, a divided congregation in an historic American church came *together*—including one of the leading Copperheads (John Christian Bullitt)—to praise and erect memorials to the two

among them, their pastor and his soldier son, who personified the better angels of our nature.

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We, again, are fiercely divided—and in crisis. Climate change. Endemic mass shootings. Tariff wars. Immigration detention centers. Sanctuary cities. Muslim bans. Resurgent white nationalism.

In April, at West Point, historian Ronald C. White spoke at the dedication of a new statue of Ulysses S. Grant. In recent years, Grant has undergone an historical rehabilitation. Long overlooked in history—and derided as a drunkard, a crude military butcher, and an incompetent if not corrupt president, Grant is re-seen now, as White said, in “a fresh light.”

White and other historians today, like Ron Chernow, reveal how Grant was seen by many Americans in the light of their day, filtered as it was then, too, by the distorting glass of white supremacy but not yet by the dark shades of Jim Crow that Americans—*white* Americans—donned after Grant’s two-term presidency. I quote from Ron White’s keynote address last April at West Point: “Grant’s fall from American grace,” he said, “largely coincided with the rise of white supremacy in the early 20th

century. During that period, leaders [like Grant] who stood up for the rights of African Americans were not often lionized.”

In fact, the rise of white supremacy in the early 20th century coincided also with the rise of Confederate monuments, including the statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, commissioned in 1917 and dedicated in 1924, just one year prior to 30,000 robed Klansmen parading in the streets of our nation’s capital.

Yes, Lee was “a great general,” as the current resident in our White House continues to insist, but Lee’s *wrongful* cause is still too much hideously ignored. Grant, the greater American general, felt and understood immediately how we, too, ought to remember Lee. “I felt,” Grant wrote of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, “like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause, though that cause was, I believe, one of the worst for which a people ever fought, and one for which there was the least excuse.”

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Here, on a recent Memorial Day—as I did last Memorial Day and as I’ll do again on Veterans Day—I pay homage to the true American patriotism of the father and son, side by side in a

graveyard on the north bank of the Merrimack River, just up the hill from the boyhood home and riverside neighborhood where Benjamin Dorr had grown up.

The reader who questioned my portrayal of Dorr as an American hero concluded his letter with this sentence: “Your work made me realize that my abolitionist ‘heroes,’ with views ahead of [their time] and extreme to the vast majority of people, were unable to reach and persuade the middle.” Precisely right! No doubt the moral courage and heroism of abolition activists like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and this city’s own William Still. They advanced a *righteous* cause that precipitated a war for wider liberty.

No doubt, as well, that Benjamin Dorr and William White Dorr, like Lincoln and Grant, helped to advance liberty by leading Americans to a *higher* middle ground, closer to a more perfect union. That’s a higher ground we are again challenged to find ... lest we lose it to our worst tribal nature.

In March of 1865, to the astonishment of many and the disdain of some who anticipated victory, Lincoln neither exulted, nor beat his chest, nor vowed vengeance on the rebels, nor

boasted the greatness of his leadership, nor exclaimed at the size of his crowd. Instead, in his 2nd Inaugural Address, Lincoln invoked the spirit of Christian charity and forgiveness – for which Northerners on the left and right, Democrats and Republicans (!), scorned him as naively conciliatory. Wimpy. Weak.

Quoting from three Bible passages (two from Matthew and one from the 19th Psalm), Lincoln suggested that Americans of the South and of the North were called to **atone** for the crime of racial slavery – that the war and its grievous losses were the price of their atonement. And that’s the humble faith in which Benjamin Dorr sought to make sense of the loss of his son; he struggled with God to believe that his son’s death had not been meaningless or in vain.

The monument to Capt. Dorr and the *memento mori* the Rev. Dorr kept of his son – his treasured collection of Will’s letters, drawings, cut flowers, and personal belongings – represent (in the words of another historian) “a deep willingness to believe that the violent death of a soldier could regenerate the nation,” particularly the sacrifice of one so pure of heart.

History teaches that we should contend, dissent, and do right, as God gives us to see the right. But that’s not all. We

Americans need now to heed the call of our greatest leaders and forebears:

- the call to contend in our politics with civility and reason,
- in good faith that not *all* differences of opinion are unpatriotic,
- in acknowledgment that dissent against governing policy and power has oftentimes safeguarded America's *truest* ideals,
- and in the true American spirit of goodwill for others and for the world.

“With malice toward none,” said the Republican President who knew better what makes America great; “with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds.”

Let’s tweet THAT!

And this, too—just four score and seven characters, minus 10: “We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth.” #democracy.

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In conclusion, it's fitting to reflect on the words of the great American we commemorate today. Benjamin Dorr wrote a history of this church in 1841. His history concludes with words strikingly consonant with Lincoln's evocation, 20 years later, of the "mystic chords of memory" that would "yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature." Of this church—The Nation's Church—Dorr wrote this, two decades before the outbreak of civil war: "There is a chord of tender feeling, which will be found to vibrate in the bosom of every one who reflects, that here so many generations have worshipped, and that, beneath its aisles, and around its walls, the ashes of multitudes of these now repose in peace and safety."

Yet, conflict over slavery grew to disturb that peaceful repose—in this church as in the nation at large. Preaching here on January 4, 1861—as slave states, one by one, were then seceding from the Union—again the Rev. Dorr remarkably presaged the imagery and hopeful tone of the Inaugural Address Lincoln would deliver exactly two months later. From this chancel, Dorr said:

And as untold millions, living in separate communities, from the sunny south to the frozen north, yet knit together by ties of kindred and love, repose under the shadow of this one

vine, without any to molest or make them afraid, this will be the feeling of all hearts, this the confession of every tongue—[and he quotes from the 133rd Psalm:] “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”

And yet, as Lincoln later put it, “the war came.”

Throughout that most divisive time in “The Nation’s Church” as in the nation at large, Benjamin Dorr actively supported Union & Emancipation—AND he managed to preserve this venerable American church intact. The nation re-united. Slavery was abolished. But threats to our last best hope rose again. And Dorr never ceased to lament their malignance.

Just weeks shy of his 70th birthday and 10 months after the assassination of the President who had long before warned that “[i]f destruction be our lot” it “cannot come from abroad” but can only “spring up amongst us,” Dorr stood here and preached the very same jeremiad. His words, like Lincoln’s, are for all time—surely for our time, now, as much as ever. Dorr said:

We complain much, and justly, of the wickedness of the age in which we live. It is, indeed, “a sinful generation.” Infidelity is rife in the land. ... Fanaticism, in its varied and hideous forms, goes out as the pioneer to infidelity; first making its victims credulous of everything, and then leaving

them hopelessly hardened in an evil heart of unbelief. And where there is neither fanaticism nor infidelity, there is, too generally, a spirit of selfishness, covetousness, worldly-mindedness, eating into almost every heart, “as doeth a canker.”

And so, let us strive on—shall we?—to finish the work we are in.