

THE UNFINISHED WORK

A homily preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Over nearly two-and-a-half centuries of our nation's history, more than 42 million Americans have served in our nation's military forces. More than 1.3 million of them have been killed. We owe these veterans a debt of gratitude for the freedom they have preserved and the prosperity freedom has made possible. We seek in some small measure repay this debt by honoring them on Veterans Day.

The observance of Veterans Day originated as Armistice Day, which was set aside by the United States, Great Britain, and France to commemorate the end of the Great War — also known at its outset as “The War to End War” — precisely one hundred years ago today, on November 11, 1918. After World War II, November 11 was recognized as a day of tribute to the veterans and the dead of that conflict as well.

On this Veterans Day, we acknowledge those of our number who have given what Abraham Lincoln, in his address to consecrate the Civil War cemetery at Gettysburg called, “the last full measure of devotion.” We have no record of how many members of All Souls fought in the Great War, now known as World War I. But during World War II, at least 140 members of this congregation — mostly men, but a few women as well — served in the armed forces. They were sergeants and seamen, medics and submarine commanders, aviators and intelligence officers, privates and lieutenants and majors, coxswains and yeomen and colonels. Four men died: Jacques Rodney Eisner, Frazier Curtis, Adolf Paul Constantin Schramm, Jr., and James Freeman Curtis, Jr. As far as we know, one All Souls member died in the Vietnam War: Eugene Shumbris. As the inscription on the commemorative plaque outside the entrance to Reidy Friendship Hall notes, the members of All Souls who gave their last full measure of devotion on the battlefield died “that freedom may live.”

Over the course of our nation's history, the greatest threats to our founding ideals as a nation — freedom for each, and liberty and justice for all — as well as the greatest threats to our existence as United States, have come not from without, but from within. Especially over the last couple of years, many of us have felt keenly a burgeoning threat to these founding ideals from within our nation's borders, and especially from within its most hallowed halls of power. One reason to applaud the outcome of voting on Tuesday is that some semblance of a balance of power has been restored to our nation's capital.

Another reason to applaud, perhaps ultimately more important, is that legions more Americans came to the defense of our nation's founding ideals in these times of peril. Young people, LGBTQ people, people of color, and especially women, who ran for office in unprecedented numbers and won in unprecedented numbers.

When President Lincoln consecrated the cemetery at Gettysburg, where some of the 600,000 Americans who died during the Civil War are buried, along with casualties of other wars, he dedicated neither the dead nor the cemetery itself. Rather, Lincoln used the occasion to dedicate the living, himself included, to the noble duty that claimed the lives of those whose bodies lay in the graves around them.

Lincoln put it this way:

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

It is my hope that the majority of voters on Tuesday have committed to living for the same noble purpose for which so many have died: to give this nation a new birth of freedom. Indeed, it is my prayer that all of us will give this cause a full measure of our devotion. As Lincoln put it, it is for us to be dedicated here to the unfinished work those who have gone before us have so nobly advanced.

The same principle applies to our life at All Souls. For nearly two centuries, this congregation has endured and often flourished because many among us, and many who have gone before us, have given it a full measure of their devotion. On this Anniversary Sunday, we honor their service and their sacrifice.

Like our nation, All Souls did not burst into being spontaneously, nor is this congregation a creature of happenstance. It's here because, beginning with Lucy Channing Russel in 1819, people of deep faith and visionary purpose took personally the responsibility of building this congregation and making it strong. Today, it is for us to be dedicated here to the unfinished work those who have gone before us have so nobly advanced.

For most of us, the work of upholding our highest ideals — whether personal, or congregational, or national — will not require our deaths. But it will require us fully to give our lives, because the work of achieving our aspirations remains unfinished. To paraphrase Lincoln, it is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us: to nurture possibilities for redemptive change within ourselves, among the inhabitants of this great nation, and all around this magnificent planet we call home.