

... It has been brought to my attention that it is a rare occasion indeed when two of the honored traditions, here in Gettysburg, Dedication Day and Remembrance Day should, by coincidence, fall on the same calendar date. However, in truth and in full disclosure, I am not big believer in coincidence and choose to believe instead that there is purpose in all that transpires, both in heaven and on this earth. So, as we gather on this day to pause and reflect and remember, I shall take my invitation to be here, to be part of some purposeful intent and with your kind permission, will use the time graciously given to me as an opportunity to share with you some of what is on my mind and on my heart these days. I will confess to you at the outset that recent events in America, have caused my heart to be disquieted and full of dismay and my Soul is discomfited.

When President Lincoln stood here one hundred and fifty-three years ago today, our nation was then, as it is now, in turmoil and he was faced with an America not dissimilar from our own; an America reeling from the effects of a very costly conflict. A conflict that was rooted in the opposition of ideas as well as ideals. And very much like today, a conflict where combatants on both sides of the divide who were once neighbors, friends even family, now harbored hearts full of anger, dissension and distrust. In Lincoln's time our nation was locked in a struggle over the issues of race and class and the direction of our national economy and we proved ourselves willing to wage a bloody war over which among us was to have access to the tenets of our nation's founding; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. 15 decades later, these very issues confront us still and the promise of America has yet to be delivered to too many of her children.

So exactly what part of, "All men are created equal" do we continue to fail to grasp?

No matter which candidate you supported in our most recent election, no matter which political ideology you embrace, we must finally come to the indisputable truth that we are indeed a house divided, and in another moment committed to our national memory, Abraham Lincoln once said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

Not since the occasion we commemorate today has the chasm that separates us been so pronounced, so profound. So, where do we go from here, America? I put it to you that we are, in this moment, a nation faced with a crisis that truly has the power to tear us asunder and unlike any outside force or influence, this crisis one of our own making, and has been over the past 200 years fomented within the framework of our own history. Since our inception, the United States has revealed itself to possess a national character that is, at best conflicted. We have forged for ourselves a duality of identity that, on the one hand, professes a love of freedom while on the other engaging in the enslavement of our fellow man based solely on the color of one's skin. We say we treasure above all else, a love of liberty, and yet are willing to imprison over 100,000 of our Japanese brothers and sisters in internment camps during World War II. We claim to value justice, while making legitimate through law and legislation the oppression of any and all that we can comfortably classify as "other". And so, I ask again, "What part of, 'All men are created equal' have I failed to understand?"

Whenever I have the opportunity to mention my Mother in public, I do. Erma Gene Christian. That is my mother's name. I believe that I am the man that I am because she is who she is! It is from my mother, that I have inherited my love of language and the written word. In my mother's house you either read a book or got hit in the head with one. The choice was always yours, but she was determined that one way or another, you we're going engage with the written word! Erma Gene's first degree, in English Language and Literature, was from Philander Smith, an historically Black College in Little Rock, Arkansas. After two years at Kansas University, she transferred to Philander and graduated at the age of 19. She was the first person in her family to go to college. Her first career was as an English teacher at the High School level. Her second career was in the field of Social Work and after earning her second degree, a Masters in Social Work, from night school, while working a full time job as a Social worker during the day and raising 3 children by herself, my mother made it her priority to instill in me one of the most important values a human being can pass *one* to another. My mother taught me that, "there are no limits to what I could accomplish in this life, with the exception of those limits that I might self-impose." She instilled in me the importance of education because she knew that in America, a quality education is the ultimate leveler of the playing field. My mother knew that I would grow up and would, one day inherit a world that would sometimes be hostile to my presence, simply because of the color of my skin. And, she knew that the best thing she could do for me as my mother, was, to in a world full of inequality, give me a tool with which I could

compete more equally with my melanin challenged peers! She didn't sugar coat it... My mother explained to me that my journey in life was not destined to be an easy one. The truth was, she told me that as a black male in America, my life would be fraught with injustice and frustration with the unfairness of that injustice. She taught me how in America, the color of my skin all but guaranteed that my journey would be perilous, sometimes life threatening, but she assured me that I had the wherewithal to overcome it all. With a fierceness and an intensity that indicated that my life depended on it, because it did, she drummed into me that I was capable of triumph over any adversity and that it was my right to define my destiny for myself!

The way forward is clear, America... we must re-dedicate ourselves to the proposition that in this country, all men **and** women, are created equal and as such we are all deserving of and entitled to the dignity and respect we ourselves would want to be accorded. Otherwise the dead which surround us here in this place, **will** have died in vain.

Abraham Lincoln once called America, "the last best hope of Earth." I have always believed that about my country. I still do. Like you, I know myself to be a patriot! I consider myself a man who loves his country and strives daily to lend my efforts to those who are similarly committed to the ongoing greatness of America. Are we a perfect Union? No! By no means... No! However we have demonstrated time and again that when we put our minds to it, great things are possible...

That when we pull together, we are capable of triumph over ANY adversity!

Ladies and gentlemen, as Lincoln said here 153 years ago today, "there is a great task remaining before us" and once again it is Lincoln himself who sets our course and lights the way for us all and I will leave you with his words, "The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just -- a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless." He speaks for me, "the way is plain, peaceful, generous and just and I pray that, as a nation, we find the courage and conviction to heed President Lincoln's sage advice.