On June 16, 1858, delegates of the Illinois Republican State Convention chose Abraham Lincoln as their candidate for U.S. Senate. In his acceptance speech, Lincoln quoted scripture saying, “A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free.” Controversy surrounding the speech cost Lincoln the Senate seat, but would ultimately pave the way to the White House. The issue of slavery led to bitterly divisive arguments, pitting nationalism against states’ rights. Maryland, as a border state, had sorely divided loyalties. Succession was a real possibility. Annapolis was strategically important, given its deep-water port, rail-head and proximity to Washington DC. As troops and supplies were gathered to bolster the Union Army, multiple regiments encamped on the grounds of the Naval Academy, disrupting normal routine. Although Midshipmen had taken an oath of loyalty to the Constitution, the pressure to choose sides was immense. Midshipmen W.E. Yancey was the first to depart for Confederate Naval Service, upon receiving a telegram from his father demanding his resignation or disownment. One year later Midshipman Yancey was killed at the Battle of Ball’s Bluff (Loudoun County, Virginia, October 21, 1861). One hundred and six midshipmen resigned in the winter, spring and summer of 1860/1, returning to southern states that had seceded from the Union. More would follow before those remaining boarded the Constitution, setting sail for Fort Adams in Newport, RI, where the Naval Academy would set-up temporary quarters. At that time, no-one could foresee a return to the banks of the Severn in October 1865. The future of the nation and the Naval Academy were in jeopardy.

1 Jesus’ words ring true. A nation divided against itself cannot stand. A Naval Academy divided against itself cannot stand. God’s creation, divided against itself, cannot stand.

Genesis 3 tells us that the Creator made his rounds in the Garden of Eden during the breezy portion of the day. Like a good Commanding Officer or Command Duty Officer, God exercised leadership by walking around, ensuring good order and discipline. Seemingly unaware of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, God calls to Adam, “Where are you?” This is a question that rings across all time, confronting us today as it did then. “It’s the central question between God and us.” The answer to this question reveals much about our relationship with God.

Instead of pulling out Reef Points to review their five basic responses, Adam and Eve offer excuses for their divided loyalties. Adam blames God and Eve saying, “The woman You put at my side – she gave me of the tree, and I ate.” Eve blames the snake saying, “The serpent duped me, and I ate.” Divided against itself, the ideal world can no longer stand. The Garden of Innocence gives way to Paradise Lost. Now, living East of Eden, in the words of today’s Confession, we strain at God’s guidance like unruly children. We feel our strength and imagine ourselves to be all powerful. We rejoice in our life and imagine ourselves to be immortal. We know our talents and desire independence, rather than placing our trust in God. Caught in the grip of other powers, we are led away from God’s loving embrace into the slavery of selfish greed and the adoration of youthfulness, materialism and power. Along with Jesus’ family and the religious leaders of the day, we often temper our discipleship by dividing our loyalties.
Jesus’ ministry and his teaching-with-authority threatened the status quo. The spectacle drew clamoring crowds, with the potential to get unruly. The scribes assumed this Jesus was in league with the Prince of Demons, a hypothesis Jesus quickly refutes as illogical. Jesus’ family of origin thought he was crazy and they were prepared to restrain him. Perhaps the family addressed the crowd in this way: “Nothing to see here. Jesus is exhausted and not in his right mind. Make way, so that we can get him to bed.” I’m reminded of when I told my father, a Marine Corps Gunny, that I was going to resign my active-duty commission as a Surface Warfare Officer in order to attend seminary. My Dad was prepared to restrain me, convinced I was not in my right mind. “Son, you’re tired,” he said, “four years of sea-duty to include two Westpacs…Take those orders ashore and ensure you are making the correct decision.”

Jesus ushers in the Kingdom of God and calls for a response to this good news, redefining what it means to be family. Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” The answer: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” What is the will of God? Mark 12:28-34 provides the answer. An increasing love for God and for other people fulfills the two greatest commandments. As we daily study God’s word, pray, practice stewardship, invite and engage in service, divided loyalties dissipate and our love for God and other people increases. As our love for God and other people increases, we advance along the spiritual continuum until our lives are Christ centered. The health of any congregation is determined by “the movement of parishioners toward Christ, toward deep love of God and genuine love for others.”

Like the Grinch in Dr. Suess’ Christmas tale, our hearts are to expand exponentially as we grow spiritually.

Prospective members of the Class of 2020, where are you? Faculty and staff, where are you? Friends and family of this chapel, the Cathedral of the Navy, where are you? Where are we? Are we growing in our love for God and for other people? Are we exercising the spiritual disciplines? Or does our allegiance lie elsewhere? Are we making excuses for being in the grip of other powers, blaming a spouse, a boss, or even God for our waywardness? If so, turn away from competing loyalties and turn towards God. Perhaps you are stalled in your spiritual growth and need a jump-start. Let me encourage you to get involved in bible study, discussing the scriptures and their application to daily living – in a small group where those gathered hold each other accountable. Let me encourage you to pray unceasingly and share your gifts of time, talent and resources to build up the kingdom of God. Let me encourage you to invite others into relationship with Christ and become actively involved in service to those in need. By exercising the spiritual disciplines, we grow into a life that is Christ centered. To do otherwise is to follow in the footsteps of Adam and Eve, Jesus’ family of origin, and the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Amen.

1) Much of this information gleaned from The Spirited Years, A History Of The Antebellum Naval Academy by Charles Todorich (Naval Institute Press, 1984).

2) “Reveal” by Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson (Willow Creek Resources, 2007), pg. 8.

3) Adapted from a Prayer of Approach and Confession by Rev. Andrea Price (http://re-worship.blogspot.ca/2012/05/prayer-of-confession-proper-5-b_30.html)
4) Reveal, pg 8.
5) Reveal, pg 15.