

## **“The Spiritual Legacy of Abraham Lincoln”**

Rev. Stephen Michie    Huguenot Memorial Presbyterian Church  
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**Exodus 14:5-15      Matthew 18:21-35**

205 years ago this week, an individual was born who so towered above his contemporaries that he is now recognized as “belonging to the ages.” Of Abraham Lincoln, Carl Sandburg once told a joint session of Congress: “Millions there are who take him as a personal treasure. He had something they would like to see spread everywhere over the earth.” Part of the “something” Lincoln had was a spiritual profundity that may be unmatched in American history. It is this dimension of the man’s spirit that I wish to call to your attention this morning, on the weekend when we’re asked to remember the legacies in particular of A. Lincoln, and G. Washington.

We are able to identify several influences which contributed to Lincoln’s spiritual greatness. The first was his relationship to the Church. That he never joined any congregation officially is less remarkable than some have made it out to be. These days we expect a serious Christian to unite with a particular church, but such was not the case in Lincoln’s day. When he was elected President in 1860, less than one-fourth of the population were church members. But beginning with his years in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln attended church frequently, and he appears to have enjoyed the friendship of three capable pastors, all of whom with their counsel contributed to Lincoln’s faith development.

More important than the church in Lincoln’s achievement of spiritual depth was his familiarity with the Scriptures. His mother fostered in him a love for the Bible which he never lost. He called it “the best gift God has given to humanity,” and his knowledge of its contents far exceeded that of many of today’s clergy. His speeches are sprinkled with biblical quotations and allusions, not as decorative additions but to emphasize matters of substance. In a *Wall Street Journal* article this week, passed along by Jeff Marcks, we know that Lincoln “learned an elevated language from the Bible, which allowed him to connect with ordinary Americans, who understood his frequent biblical allusions and references.” Lincoln turned to the Bible, it seems, not so much to enhance his personal piety as in the hope of finding light to shine on the social and political problems of the day. It is plainly evident that he found it.

Also contributing to his spiritual profundity was Lincoln’s practice of prayer. One of his biographers writes: “The evidence of Lincoln’s own practice of personal prayer is so abundant that no thoughtful person can deny it. He prayed alone, and he called the nation to prayer; he prayed for guidance and he prayed in gratitude; he prayed in defeat and he prayed in victory.” Above all, it appears that he prayed to learn the will of God for his own life, and for that of the nation. Like Christ in Gethsemane, Lincoln came to believe not only that the divine will can be known, at least in part, but that the only hope for the human race lies in learning and conforming to that will.

Another factor in Lincoln’s spiritual greatness is of a different sort. He was from the beginning a doubter and questioner. Religious dogmas, in particular, were for him not merely to be accepted but probed. Perhaps because Lincoln questioned religious dogma, he became profoundly aware of the truth that lay behind many of them. Thus when the time came, he was able to interpret for the nation the meaning of the anguish and pain through which it was passing.

Finally, in this litany of things which helped Lincoln arrive at spiritual greatness, we should note his capacity for growth. As his one-time critic Horace Greeley put it: “Never before did one so constantly and visibly grow under the discipline of incessant cares, anxieties and trials.” Those things came both in

his personal life and with his presidential responsibilities. Not only did he endure them, he learned from them, and because of them he became enormously compassionate – almost Christ-like in his practice of mercy.

Out of Lincoln’s experience, and as a result of his worship and prayer, his study of the Scriptures, and his incessant wrestlings, came two important convictions of a theological nature. First, there was the conviction that all of life is lived “under God.” Lincoln came relatively early to this understanding in his personal life, and it gave him the strength to endure all manner of trials and tribulations. He was subjected regularly to abuse by his adversaries, whether because of his political convictions or his gangly, even homely physical appearance. Two of his children died very young, and his marriage was beset with great difficulties.

The reason for choosing today’s reading from Exodus is that it contains the text Lincoln revealingly referred to once in a letter to his friend, Joshua Speed. Lincoln was only 32 at the time, and the occasion of his letter was the breaking of his engagement to Mary Todd. Lincoln wrote his friend: “Whatever God designs he will do for me yet. ‘*Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord,*’ is my text just now.” The breaking of the engagement had sent Lincoln into one of his periodic spells of depression, when he moved through dark days of low spirits and indecision about just about everything. Turning to the Bible, he was drawn to the text that told him to do nothing for a while, but to wait and give the Lord a chance to work.

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Regarding the nation he had been elected to lead, Lincoln’s conviction that all life is lived “under God” led in another direction – and saved him from idolatry. Great as was his patriotism and his commitment to saving the Union, Lincoln recognized – and called his fellow citizens to understand – that as the Bible says, “*the Lord is high above all nations.*” Lincoln told the people that their main concern should not be to persuade God to be on their side, but instead to seek diligently and sincerely to be on God’s side.

In delivering the Gettysburg Address, by adding the words “under God” to his written text, Lincoln was revealing the heart of his theology. One wonders when we use this phrase today – as in the Pledge of Allegiance – whether our meaning is anything like Lincoln’s. For many in our time the implication seems to be that God and country are one and the same, or nearly so, as if we are God’s “favored ones.” For Lincoln, being “under God” meant something else. He understood that even at its best, the nation is not worthy of our ultimate loyalty. There is a greater authority to which even the nation is accountable, just as there is a higher sovereignty than that of human beings which ultimately rules.

The centrality of this conviction comes through in a letter Lincoln wrote following his Second Inaugural, in which he had said, “The Almighty has his own purposes.” About that speech, Lincoln wrote: “People are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however ... is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told...”

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The other of Lincoln’s fundamental convictions was that human actions have moral consequences. He took seriously the idea that “*God is not mocked,*” that we reap what we sow. Aware as he was of the moral ambiguity of complex issues, and aware, also, of the mixed motives which govern all human behavior, Lincoln nevertheless believed in a moral purpose which it is our duty to seek to understand and to obey.

Lincoln came to see slavery as a glaring example of something that was an “offense” to God. In his Second Inaugural, Lincoln so identified it, and told the nation that the awful war which was then

nearing its end was nothing less than the judgment of God. “Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away,” he said. “As was said 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said, *‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’*” Knowing as he did how the sins of one generation are visited upon those that follow, Lincoln would not have been surprised that even today, this nation that he so greatly loved has not yet become truly free from the effects of slavery.

Others in Lincoln’s time understood that above all else, the issue of slavery was a moral question – and some Abolitionists came to this understanding sooner than did Lincoln. What distinguished Lincoln from his contemporaries, and what sets him apart from others who have held his office, was his utter lack of self-righteousness. In Reinhold Niebuhr’s words, Lincoln knew well the tendency of political leaders to “claim more ultimate virtues for their cause than either a transcendent providence, or a neutral posterity, will provide.”

He refused to describe the South as evil, and he did not exonerate the North from justified blame. Speaking of Southern whites, Lincoln said: “They are just what we would be in their situation. If slavery did not already exist among them, they would not introduce it. If it did now exist among us, we should not instantly give it up.” Lincoln knew what the morally conscientious do not always appreciate: that right and wrong sometimes are not easy to distinguish, that noble principles can be in conflict with each other, and that even when the end is clearly in view, the best means to get there are not always certain.

This gave Lincoln a deep appreciation for the dilemma of the Quakers, nearly all of whom opposed slavery but also opposed the war fought to eradicate it. In his Second Inaugural he called the nation to be righteous, but without succumbing to self-righteousness. “With firmness in the right,” he said, “as God gives us to see the right.” In our day of impassioned rhetoric, both in political and ecclesiastical settings – over such issues as abortion, for example – we could all learn from Lincoln’s example of civility and humility.

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Last, but by no means least, we should name what already has been alluded to, and that is Lincoln’s magnanimous spirit, and his desire to be an agent of reconciliation. This President kept no “enemies list” – and he often dismissed, with a humorous word, frequent criticism of his appearance or actions. Of more significance, he frequently pardoned deserters and other offenders. On one occasion he wrote, concerning a soldier whose sentence he had reduced: “The case of Andrews is really a very bad one, as appears by the record before me. Yet before receiving this I had ordered his (death sentence) commuted to imprisonment, and had so telegraphed. I did this, not on any merit in the case, but because I am trying to avoid the butchering business lately.”

William Wolf, author of *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, suggests that it may have been at home, in his marriage, that Lincoln first learned the importance of forgiveness. Wolf writes: “Mary had a towering rage, was unduly concerned over little things, and seemed unable to achieve a satisfactory relationship with the children.” There were times when Lincoln would simply leave the house when that “towering rage” descended upon him. It was, however, says Wolf, in “his relationship with Mary that Lincoln learned forbearance and forgiveness, not as doctrines but in practice.”

In any case, as the war drew to its close, Lincoln let it be known that those who fought for the Confederacy (including even those like R.E. Lee who once had been Union officers) would not be punished. Regarding the Secessionists, he sounded like the father in the *Parable of the Prodigal*. “Finding themselves safely at home,” Lincoln said, “it would be utterly immaterial (he refers here to post-war punishment) whether they had ever gone abroad.” Regarding the slave-holders of the South he said: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged.”

“With malice toward none; with charity for all” was the way he ended his Second Inaugural. Having come, the war had to be prosecuted vigorously to preserve the Union. But even in the midst of the war, reconciliation had been Lincoln’s goal. Retribution was a word he did not seem to know. For all these reasons, we celebrate the spiritual legacy of Lincoln. But we ought to remember what Jesus once said, with regard to the prophets: What is important is not that we “*build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous.*” What is important is to welcome their wisdom, and to follow their example.

So with Lincoln, our duty is not merely to remember him. As he himself said, our duty is so to live “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom.” It is for us now “to strive to finish the work that we are in ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.” That, above all, is the way to honor the legacy of Abraham Lincoln’s spiritual greatness.