

**February 23, 2020**  
**Last Sunday before Lent**

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## **Lincoln's Spiritual Legacy**

Exodus 14:5-15, Matthew 18:21-35

211 years ago this month, a man was born who so towered above his contemporaries that he is now recognized as belonging to the ages. His name was Abraham Lincoln. As the greatest Lincoln scholar, Carl Sandburg, once told a joint session of the U.S. 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 political history. It is this dimension that I wish to explore with you today—partly because I was born and raised in Illinois, and Lincoln is one of my heroes.

As we begin, it may be well to identify influences that contributed to Lincoln's greatness. The first was his relationship to the church. That he never joined a church is less remarkable than some have made it out to be. These days, we expect a serious Christian to unite with a particular congregation, but such was not the case in Lincoln's day. In 1860, the year Lincoln was elected President, only 23% of the population were officially church members. But, beginning with his years as a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln attended church frequently, and he appears to have enjoyed the friendship of three capable pastors there—all of whom, with their influence, contributed to his faith development.

More important than the church in Lincoln's achievement of spiritual depth was his knowledge of the Bible. His mother fostered in him a love for the Scriptures, which he never lost. This is likely one of the main reasons he was led to say, later in his life: "All that I am, all that I ever hope to be, I owe to my angel mother." Lincoln called the Bible "the best gift God has given to humankind," and his knowledge of its contents far exceeded that of many clergy in those days. His speeches are sprinkled with biblical quotations and allusions, used not as decorative additions but to emphasize matters of substance. Abe Lincoln turned to the Bible, it seems, not so much to enhance his personal piety, but more in the hope of finding enlightenment for the social and political problems of his day. That he found that is plainly evident.

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." He prayed above all, it appears, to learn the will of God for his own life and for that of the nation. Like Jesus 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 God's will.

Another factor in Lincoln's spiritual greatness is of a different sort. He was, from the beginning, a doubter and questioner. Religious dogmas and creeds, in particular, were for him not merely to be accepted, but probed and searched. Perhaps because Lincoln questioned religious dogmas, 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 that 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 "cares, anxieties, and trials" came both in his personal life, as well as with his presidential duties. Not only did he endure them, he learned from them. And because of them, he became enormously compassionate—almost Christ-like in mercy.

Out of Lincoln's experience, and as a result of his worship and prayer, his study of the Scriptures and his incessant political wrestling, 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. It gave him the strength to endure all manner of trials and tribulations: the political abuse to which he was regularly subjected, and the deaths of two of his children; and the difficulties in his marriage.

The reason for choosing as our Old Testament lesson for today, the 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 years old at the time, and the occasion of his letter was the breaking of his engagement to Mary Todd. Lincoln wrote to his friend: "Whatever God designs, God will do for me yet. 'Stand firm and see the deliverance of the Lord,' is my text just now."

The breaking of the engagement had sent Lincoln into one of his periodic spells of depression. He moved through dark days of low spirits and indecision. 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. As regards the nation, he had been elected to lead it with Lincoln's conviction that all of life is lived "under God." This led him 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 to seek, instead, diligently and sincerely, to be on God's side. When, in delivering the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln added the words "under God" to his text, and he 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 day, 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 said, “The Almighty has his own purposes.” About that speech, Lincoln wrote: “People are not flattered being shown that there is a difference of purposes between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth I thought needed to be told...”

The other of Lincoln's fundamental convictions was that human actions have moral consequences. Lincoln took seriously the idea that “God is not mocked,” that we “reap what we sow.” Aware as he was of the moral ambiguity of many complex issues—and aware, also, of the mixed motives which govern nearly all human behavior—Lincoln nevertheless believed in a moral purpose, which it is our duty to seek to understand, and then 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—ferverently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away,” he said. “Yet if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the slave owners, 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword,...as was said three thousand 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, over two centuries after his birth, this nation that he so greatly loved has not yet become completely free from the effects of slavery and racism. Others in Lincoln's time understood that the issue of slavery was above all else a moral question. What distinguished Lincoln from his contemporaries—and sets him apart from others who have held his office—was his utter lack of self-righteousness.

In 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's words, Lincoln knew well the tendency of political leaders to “claim more ultimate virtues for their cause, that 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 blame. Speaking of southern white people, 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 in the North, we should not instantly give it up.”

Lincoln knew what the morally conscientious people do not always appreciate: that right and wrong are sometimes 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. Lincoln thus appreciated the dilemma of the Quakers, who opposed slavery but also opposed war. In his Second Inaugural, Lincoln called the nation to be righteous, without succumbing to self-righteousness: “With firmness in the right,” Lincoln said famously, “as God gives us to see the right.” In our day of impassioned rhetoric, both in political and ecclesiastical settings—over such issues as racial divisions, for example—we could all learn from Lincoln's example of civility and humility.

Last, but by no means least, we should name what has already been alluded to, and that is Lincoln's magnanimous spirit, as well as his desire to be an agent of reconciliation. This President kept no "enemies list." He often dismissed, with a humorous word, what was frequent criticism of his physical appearance or actions. Of more significance, he often 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...I did this, not on any merit in the case, but because I am trying to avoid the butchering business lately."

While this decision of Lincoln might seem to us to shed light on the larger question of capital punishment, recall that the "butchering business" refers directly to the Civil War. 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 Todd 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 relation 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 Robert E. Lee who had once 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 whether they had ever gone abroad." Regarding the slave holders of the South, he said, "It may seem strange that any men should dare 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" is the historic phrase with which Lincoln ended his Second Inaugural address. Having come, the war had to be prosecuted vigorously in order to preserve the Union. But even in the midst of 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 Abraham Lincoln this month. 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 to live so that this nation, "under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." It is for us now, as he also said, "to strive on 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.