

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“The Spirituality of Abe Lincoln”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
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Meditation: From the Gettysburg Address, the last lines (in italics) borrowed from Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker:

. . .we can not dedicate—we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. 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 before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they have 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.*

Introduction

The service today is a time to acknowledge and celebrate the 200 birthday of Abraham Lincoln (Feb. 12). I have chosen this day to address a topic that has fascinated me for a long time: Lincoln’s view of religion and his spirituality. Many experts say Lincoln rates as number one when rating our Presidents, as shown in a recent poll, because he led our nation through the most difficult time in our history. I agree with Leo Tolstoy who wrote:

The greatness of Napoleon, Caesar or Washington is only moonlight by the sun of Lincoln. His example is universal and will last thousands of years. . .He was bigger than his country—bigger than all the Presidents together. . .and as a great character he will live as long as the world lives.

On the humorous side, when I had a beard, which is most of my adult life, there were many times when I was told I look like Lincoln. There was that crew leader at McDonalds who called me Abe every time I asked for a cup of coffee and an order of pancakes. There was that time when I had some portraits developed and the owner of the camera shop, a neighbor of mine, couldn’t find the pictures under Hudgins or Morris. He had this surprised look on his face, when he said, “Yes, of course, Abe, Abe Lincoln,” and he went straight to my photos.

And I will never forget the day I was walking in New York City when two young African-American boys were running in and out of the stores in front of me, saying, “Doesn’t he look like President Lincoln?” Abe must have been their hero, too.

Abraham Lincoln

We have much to be inspired by this man born in a log cabin in the backwoods of Hardin County, Kentucky, to a poverty stricken migratory carpenter and farmer, who lost his mother when he was nine in Indiana. Abe had less than a year of formal schooling, was self-taught, rose to become a very skilled and successful lawyer, then a successful state legislator, congressman, then President of the United States.

We should remember that Lincoln first made his mark in the debates with Douglas in the senatorial election of 1858. Though supported by the abolitionists he was not an abolitionist. He regarded slavery as an injustice and an evil, and uncompromisingly opposed its extension.

What made Lincoln a great President was his patience through the Civil War. He held his course which was always in favor of the Union of our nation. He had a noble vision, had great character, and became a symbol for democracy.

Providence

Looking at his religious views, Abe Lincoln accepted the prominent religious principle of his day: providence. Joseph Priestley, the British Unitarian who led Jefferson to claim Unitarianism, preferred the "doctrine of necessity." Lincoln also affirmed the growing Unitarian principle that humans must accept responsibility for what they do with what God gives them. I would hold that it is this principle and his dislike of creeds that kept Lincoln from affirming the Christian faith of his time. He spoke openly about his religious beliefs more than any President before him but unlike them he did not join any church.

An example of Lincoln's belief in providence and his comfort with religious language was his message to Congress in 1862. He opened with these words:

And while it has not pleased the Almighty to bless us with a return of peace, we can but press on guided by the best light He gives us.

Lincoln's providential God was also a just God. He quoted Thomas Jefferson's famous words: "I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just!"

Some critics said that Lincoln's concept of God was the same as that of nature, and therefore impersonal. (Sandburg, p. 381) This is the same criticism of the Deists of Lincoln's day, and a minority of the more radical Unitarians and Universalists.

Universal Salvation

One aspect of Lincoln's theology, which disturbed some of his Illinois neighbors, was his conviction that God would not in the end be defeated, even by man's sin and foolishness. Consequently, he said he could not believe that the omnipotent love of God is consistent with vindictiveness or "the endless punishment of any one of the human race." Lincoln was a Universalist. This he affirmed in his office in Springfield as late as 1859. One scholar concludes:

He saw punishment as parental in its object, 'intended for the good of the offender,' and more and more he applied this to the nation as well as to the individual person. Without this conception, much of the Second Inaugural is incomprehensible. (Abraham Lincoln, Elton Trueblood, p. 83)

His Religious Practice

Lincoln was criticized by his opponents for not joining a religion. He was, however, most comfortable with his religious views:

During his forty-nine months in the presidency Abraham Lincoln issued nine separate calls to public penitence, fasting, prayer, and thanksgiving. (Trueblood, p. 84)

Lincoln was also sensitive to the fact that we are a country of many faiths. He issued religious proclamations on days other than religious holy days.

Scriptures

Like the Unitarians and Universalists of his day, Lincoln interpreted Scripture in light of reason and human experience. He did not deny revelation and faith but emphasized reason. Commenting on the Bible to Joshua Speed, he said: ". . .take all of this Book upon reason that you can, and the balance

on faith, and you will live and die a happier man."(p. 59) Following the pattern of Jefferson, he saw the Bible primarily as an ethical code.

Regarding slavery, Lincoln knew that the Bible does not admonish slavery--a popular argument during the heat of the controversy. But he criticized this argument and affirmed the belief that the Bible first recommends compassion. He quoted Mt. 25: 40: "Verily, I say unto you, inasmuch you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

Religion and Humor in Lincoln

Lincoln had a wonderful sense of humor and was a great story-teller. There is an old story of two Quaker women comparing Lincoln and Jefferson Davis. One said Davis would win because he was a praying man. The other said Lincoln was a praying man as well. The first lady responded: "Yes but the Lord will think Lincoln's prayer was a joke."

Lincoln's Spirituality

The most important part of Lincoln's religion was his heightened spirituality. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

An analysis of the religion of Abraham Lincoln in the context of the traditional religion of his time and place and of its polemical use on the slavery issue, which corrupted religious life in the days before and during the Civil War, must lead to the conclusion that Lincoln's religious convictions were superior in depth and purity to those, not only of the political leaders of his day, but of the religious leaders of the era.(Trueblood, p. 107)

A summary of Lincoln's religious pilgrimage can be found in his own words:

Those days of trouble found me tossed amid a sea of questionings. They piled big around me. Through all I groped my way until I found a stronger and higher grasp of thought, one that reached beyond this life with a clearness and satisfaction I had never known before. The Scriptures unfold before me with a deeper and more logical appeal, through these new experiences than anything else I could find to turn to, or even before had found in them. I do not claim that all my doubts were removed then, or since that time have been swept away. They were not.(Trueblood, p. 100)

One of the best sources for Lincoln's spirituality is found in his favorite poem he knew and often quoted by heart. He didn't know the author. It was called "Mortality" and it was written by Scotsman William Knox. Here is a portion of that poem:

So the multitude goes, like the flower or the weed,
That withers away to let others succeed;
So the multitude comes, even those we behold.
To repeat every tale that has often been told.

For we are the same, our fathers have been,
We see the same sights our fathers have seen;
We drink the same streams and see the same sun
And run the same course our fathers have run. . . .

Yes! Hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,
Are mingled together in sun-shine and rain;
And the smile and the tear, and the song and the dirge,

Still follow each other, like surge upon surge.

Hope and despondency, pleasure and pain, the smile and the tear—existential realities of his life. Lincoln served our nation during the most trying of days. He had every reason to question humanity.

One of the defining moments of his life and his spirituality was on his return to his Indiana boyhood home. It touched in him chords of sadness and fatalism that are found in this poem by Knox. Lincoln wrote his own poem after this trip. It has similar themes. Here is what he wrote:

But here's an object more of dread
 Than ought the grave contains—
 A human form with reason fled,
 While wretched life remains. . . .

I've heard it oft, as if I dreamed,
 Far distant, sweet, and lone—
 The funeral dirge, it ever seemed
 Of reason dead and gone. . . .

O death! Thou awe-inspiring prince,
 That keepest the world in fear;
 Why doest thou tear more blest ones hence,
 And leave him ling'ring here?

Lincoln gave this poem the title, "Return," with two subtitles, "Reflection" and "Maniac." He called it doggerel. These words would become prophetic for what was to come of our nation. I can see the dead at Gettysburg when I read these lines:

A human form with reason fled,
 While wretched life remains.

The best support for Lincoln's spirituality was written by his two secretaries. They wrote:

He was a man of profound and intense religious feeling. We have no purpose of attempting to formulate his creed; we question if he himself ever did so. There have been swift witnesses who, judging from expression uttered in his callow youth, have called him an atheist, and others who, with the most laudable intentions, have remembered improbably, conversations which they bring forward to prove at once his orthodoxy and their intimacy with him. But leaving aside these apocryphal evidences, we have only to look at his authentic public and private utterances to see how deep and strong in all the latter part of his life was the current of his religious thought and emotion. He continually invited and appreciated, at their highest value, the prayers of good people. The pressure of the tremendous problems by which he was surrounded; the awful moral significance of the conflict in which he was the chief combatant; the overwhelming sense of personal responsibility, which never left him for an hour—all contributed to produce, in a temperament naturally serious and predisposed to a spiritual view of life and conduct, a sense of reverent acceptance of the guidance of a Superior Power." (Trueblood, p. 112, quote, Nocolay and Haty, vol. Vi, pp. 339-400).

Conclusion

If we are to be honest about Abraham Lincoln, we must call him complex. Trueblood concludes:

Always, in Lincoln's mature theology, there is paradox. There is sternness, yet there is also tenderness; there is melancholy, yet there is also humor; there is moral law, yet there is also compassion. History is the scene of the working out of God's justice, which we can never escape, but it is also the scene of the revelation of the everlasting mercy. . . . Lincoln, conscious as he was of the radical difference between the divine will and the human will, understood that ambiguities appear in the moral stance of even the most dedicated crusaders. (Trueblood, pp. 124-5)

If there is any question about Lincoln's religion after hearing this sermon, I offer you one final proof of his mature religion. It is found in his remarks on leaving Springfield, Illinois for Washington, D.C., to become President of the United States. Benjamin Thomas describes the moment:

The day of departure, February 11, was cold and drizzly rain. Lincoln stood for a moment at the rail, head down, an expression of tragic sadness on his face. Slowly his chin lifted and he looked into the faces of these neighbors who had come to wish him success.

A hush fell on the crowd, "My friends," said Lincoln quietly, "No one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people I owe everything. Here I have lived a quarter of a century, and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried. I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of the Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell. (Trueblood, p. 239)

In summary, the unity of our nation and the future of democracy were in good hands with the best President our nation as ever known. May we ever be thankful for this man from Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky who never joined a church but had a most mature and thoughtful spirituality.

It is my prayer that we will always keep Lincoln on our minds as we move forward into the future, especially in difficult times like today. May we be open to the faiths of others, to a united nation and diverse world. Let's continue to believe that faith can be supported by reason, that how we live is as important as what we believe, that justice for all is important to our faith, that all have the potential for health and wholeness. May we carry on the work we are called to do by supporting organizations like Pacem and Impact affirming all the citizens of our community, giving a portion of our blessings for the benefit of all, (quoting from Lincoln's 2nd Inaugural):

With malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds. . . .to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations. Amen.