

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Lessons from Lincoln

I find great comfort and strength from reading the writings of our nation's more noble characters, not the least of which is Abraham Lincoln. Often maligned today by revisionist historians who have no appreciation nor understanding of the times within which our predecessors lived, President Abe Lincoln was as plain and ordinary as a fence post.

But, oh! the depth of this man! Here was a thinking man, a man who wrestled with the hard issues of life long before the mantle of President of the United States was placed upon his shoulders.

Born in 1809, Lincoln grew up in a log cabin, working the land by the sweat of his brow. He also had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, reading at night by the glow of the coals in the fireplace. He would walk miles to borrow a book to read, and then return it again. He was a great listener, taking the time to hear people recount their troubles and woes, a practice he continued even during his time in the White House.

However, the defining event that framed Abraham Lincoln and his legacy would be the Civil War. A side note to his political career was the fact that he was the first Republican to run for president in the election of 1860. He faced two daunting issues even before he assumed the office of President. First – the issue of slavery was constantly being bandied about from the country roads of America to the Halls of Congress. This volatile topic had been discussed and debated *ad nauseam* in America since the early 1830s. Second – several Southern states threatened to secede from the Union if Lincoln were elected. These states followed through with their threat so that Lincoln had the unenviable task of trying to keep the nation unified while supporters and supporting states wavered.

Lincoln's goal was to end slavery, but not at the expense of destroying the nation. Above all else, the Union must be maintained. He took office intending to allow slavery to continue, but only in the states where it was legalized. The greatest impact would be on the Southern states. States that did not have laws allowing slavery could not enact them, forcing slavery to be confined to "slave states" only. Lincoln's hope was that Southern states would eventually end slavery due to public pressure. A Civil War was not the preferred manner to handle this monstrous wrong that had been foisted upon an entire group of people simply because of skin color.

When still in his 20s, Lincoln wrote a letter to his friend, Joshua Speed who was a slaveholder. *"I also acknowledge your rights and my obligations, under the Constitution, in regards to your slaves. I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down and caught and carried back to their stripes and unrewarded toils; I bite my lip and keep quiet. In 1841, you and I had together a tedious low-water trip on a steamboat from Louisville to St. Louis. You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio, there were on board ten or a dozen slaves*

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shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual torment to me; I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave border. It is hardly fair for you to assume that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable."

Later in 1855, Lincoln again writes to Joshua Speed. *"How can anyone who abhors the oppression of Negroes be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except Negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics.' When it comes to this, I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."* (The Know-Nothing Party, also known as the American Party in the 1840s-1850s, opposed immigrants and followers of the Catholic Church).

In a letter to H.L. Pierce in 1859, Lincoln wrote, *"This is a world of compensation; and he who would be no slave must consent to have no slave. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and under a just God, cannot long retain it."*

In a very dark time, following the Union forces losing to the Confederate forces in the Second Battle of Bull Run (Second Battle of Manassas) in August of 1862, General Lee's massive forces were moving into Northern states to strike a blow to perhaps turn the tide in favor of the Southern Cause. Union troops stopped Lee at the Battle of Antietam in September of 1862. Lincoln wrote, *"I made a solemn vow before God, that if General Lee were driven back from Pennsylvania, I would crown the result by the declaration of freedom to the slaves."*

Ignoring the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision by the Supreme Court in 1857 in which Chief Justice Roger B. Taney decided that *"slaves were not persons or citizens, but were the property of the owner, the same as their body, horse, cattle, etc., and the owner had the freedom of choice to decide what they wanted to do with their own property,"* Lincoln made good on his promise and penned the *Emancipation Proclamation* which was to go into effect as of January 1, 1863. It stated that *"all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free..."* The document granted the right to life, freedom and citizenship to all persons regardless of race, origin, circumstance, etc.

No wonder Lincoln was revered by the people! Edwin Markham wrote a poem entitled, "Lincoln: Man of the People." One portion reads, *"Up from log cabin to the Capitol, one fire was on his spirit, one resolve – To send the keen ax to the root of wrong, clearing a free way for the feet of God, the eyes of conscience testing every stroke, to make his deed the measure of a man. He built the rail-pile as he built the State, pouring his splendid strength through every blow: The grip that swung the ax in Illinois was on the pen that set a people free."*

Next week I will delve further into the life and character of this amazing man we know as our 16th President – Abraham Lincoln.