

Address at the Lincoln Celebration

Held Under the Auspices of the Colored M. E. Church

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Mr. Chairman and fellow citizens in a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, we are met here this evening to pay a tribute to a great man, perhaps the greatest man that this nation has produced, and one of the great men of all nations. However imperfect and limited may be our capacity to appreciate that greatness and nobility that was in Lincoln, yet the very purpose in trying to express something of our appreciation is a witness to the fact that there is in us something of those principles and those ideals that found their incarnation and to a remarkable degree their fulfillment in him whom our great poet has called the First American.

We might therefore at this time devote ourselves to a consideration of the noble heroism of his life. We might recall for our delight, and as tribute to his greatness, the circumstances of his birth, the hardship and the struggle of his childhood and youth. It is stimulating to bring before ourselves the picture of the young man in search of wisdom, on the floor before the fireplace reading and seeking after the great thoughts of men. Not one less romantic are the stories of his long journeys after books and his downright honest integrity. We might also speak of that memorable trip down the Mississippi, when there was burned into his moral conscience that deep and lasting hatred of slavery. Leaping over the years we might come upon him in those lonely hours when alone in the presence only of the infinite he was struggling with the great problems of the nation, and was picking his way carefully and yet with sure footing through the dismal swamp of the terrible days of rebellion. To change our view we might see him the merciful pardoner, who brought joy and comfort and awoke feelings of love in the hearts of thousands by his noble clemency in cases where he was called upon to act as judge over the conduct of men, as soldier in the army of

the union. All these incidents and all these facts of his life rouse us to a high pitch of emotional respect and hero worship. They are inspiring and ennobling. They thrill our very soul. I love to think of them.

But they do not constitute the essence of that appreciation, nor do they give the character to that tribute that in our very deepest moments we would tonight offer in memory of this man whose life has been plowed into the soil of our national ideals. Those things to which I have referred are but the incidents of a passing panorama, the beauty and the glory of whose totality takes its light and shade from the influence of a noble purpose. I suppose that the most impressive and the most inspired moment in the life of Lincoln, the moment when all the great purpose of his life to which he had paid either unconscious or conscious obedience comes to the surface for expression in that moment on the battlefield at Gettysburg when he arose to dedicate the ground already made sacred, as a final resting place for those who had fallen in battle that the nation might live. Just try to picture to yourself the situation, and the feelings that were in the mind of Lincoln. The dawn of a new day was already casting its light across the mountains and valleys of a great nation enveloped in the darkness of a civil war. The slaves had been freed, and the preservation of the union seemed assured. Here on this battlefield had been fought the great battle. Men, to whom life was as precious as it is to you and to me, had sacrificed themselves. All these thoughts were in the mind of Lincoln as he..

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... significance in the great life of the universe, does not take its character from its origin, from the nature of its surroundings, but from the character of its purpose, from the character of its destiny. The significance of the life of Booker Washington and many more like him is not determined by the fact that he was born a slave, but from the fact that in obedience to a supreme purpose, he is destined to die a man of character and integrity, a man who has done much towards seeing to it that this nation shall not perish from the earth, and that a great race shall not forfeit its possibilities of achieving the triumph of freedom in a nation of liberty. The significance of the life of Lincoln both for himself and for society does not take its character from the fact that he was born in a log

cabin, and secured his education and training for his life work at the cost of great hardship, but in the fact that he lived true to a great purpose, and died in honor, loved and respected by those to whom that purpose was sacred.

The integrity, the worth of our government, its efficiency for the welfare of our citizens does not arise in the historic events of its origin, nor indeed upon the character of its constitution, or the fact that it's terrible danger in the middle of the last century called forth the magnificent uprising of the heroic impulse, but upon the nature of that essential and fundamental purpose in accordance with which its policy and its development is directed, upon the nature and the character of the purpose that controls the conduct of the essential majority of its people. No government as such, no institution as such is sacred. Institutions become sacred and command the respect, the loyalty, and the sacrifice of man, only as the purpose of their existence is such as to command respect, loyalty, and sacrifice. My friends, the worth and the significance of our government rests in the fact that in spite of our terrible shortcomings, in spite of the fact of conditions today that make us bow our heads in shame, in spite of all that, the heart of this great nation, still responds to the essential principles and the essential ideals of democracy. So long as that ideal remains in the minds of men we can wade through the most dismal swamp of corruption, we can overcome the most terrible odds in the way of the origin and conditions in which we happen to find ourselves at any moment of our history, and feel assured that we shall all find our way through the wilderness, and come to the promised land flowing with the milk and honey of human kindness and happiness. But let us once forget the great purpose of our national life, and all our prosperity, all our material progress, all our great institutions of culture and refinement are become as the pyramids of Egypt, the dead remains of a bygone glory. In the integrity of our national purpose is the safety and the assurance of our national life.

At this time when all over this land people are with one accord recognizing the worth of Lincoln, these exercises, these monuments erected to him escape the shame of a degraded hypocrisy only as they bespeak a pure and consecrated dedication of ourselves and what we have to that left undone by the martyr President. Let us not deceive ourselves for one moment with the idea that the

success of the civil war established the security of the nation, or began to realize the ideals of a true democracy. We are face-to-face with problems as great if not greater than those which the nation of 50 years ago faced.

To say nothing of our foreign problems, there are two great domestic problems, tremendous in their scope, almost overwhelming in the pressure with which they are forcing themselves upon the people of this nation. On the one hand we have the great industrial problem each day becoming the more intense and acute in its development. This problem, sufficient in itself to tax us to the utmost, is seriously complicated by our relations with foreign countries and made the more pressing by the business conditions under which we find ourselves. In the solution of this problem we must all take our share. To avoid it is treason, not alone to that nation but to human obligations.

On the other hand we are not so blind as to overlook the fact that the race problem was not settled by the proclamation of emancipation. Just how we can train and develop ourselves so that we may come to live together in peace and mutual respect on this continent, without sacrificing the integrity of either race is not a problem upon which one may speak with dogmatic assurance. For neither race is liberty completely assured by the fourteenth amendment. That which has been done, and that only with can be done by any act of legislation is to assure the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The right to these factors of life may be assured, but the things themselves can only be assured. The possibilities of these so desirable things may lie all about us, but we may only lay hold of them through incessant labor and toil.

Here is the great thing that we ought to arrive at or at least seek after as the result of this contemplation on the life and the events of the time of Lincoln.

I said that the significance of a life and the significance of a nation does not depend upon the origin, but upon the destiny of it. We know the origin of the life of Lincoln. We know the social conditions and the moral problems which he and the people of his time faced. We know the destiny of the man, we know in part at least the changes and development of the years from 1809 to the close of the civil war. The life of Lincoln is the embodiment of

the spirit of the times. In his life there are to be noted three great forces or facts that we must lay hold of if we are to meet the problems. They are the great lessons of the day.

First, the fact of personal integrity. Not to win, but to be right.

Searching for truth, the open mind. Education, not in its narrow and academic sense, but in its broad and human sense, the power of self-control and ability to meet conditions. In its broader sense the knowledge of the civic problems, and the faithful and unswerving integrity in the discharge of civic duty and civic obligation.

Finally a sense of responsibility.