

John Brown and the Passion for Justice

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There are many reasons why I want to present this morning this subject. In the first place, I regard John Brown as one of the choice heroes of American history. Few equal him, and none surpass him. He stands among the great men of all history. I quite like the comparison implied in the address made by Charles Robinson on the occasion of dedicating the monument erected to Brown's memory at Osawatomie on the 21st anniversary of the battle of Osawatomie:

The soul of John Brown was the inspiration of the Union armies in the emancipation war, and it will be the inspiration of all men in the present and distant future who may revolt against tyranny and oppression; because he dared to be a traitor to the government that he might be loyal to humanity. To the superficial observer, John Brown was a failure. So was Jesus of Nazareth. Both suffered ignominious death, as traitors to the government, yet one is now hailed as the savior of the world from sin, and the other of a race from bondage.²

At a time when such men are lost sight of, I want to pay my tribute to him as one who placed integrity and the love of freedom above all considerations in the world.

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

² Charles L. Robinson (1818-1894) American politician, first governor of Kansas from 1861 until he was impeached in 1863. Previously he had served as a member of the California Assembly (1851-1852), and later he served as a member of the Kansas senate (1873-1881). While Governor of Kansas he commissioned John Brown as a captain in the army. This quotation from his October 30, 1877 remarks at the dedication of the monument commemorating the battle at Osawatomie can be found in *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, p. 324.

Again, I want to speak of him because at this time we like to recall something of the genius of the Puritan tradition. Fifty years ago, the sixteenth day of October occurred the famous raids on Harper's Ferry. Fifty years ago, the second of November, John Brown was hanged as a traitor. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should take this opportunity to pay our respects to this noble man, and at the same time to breathe again the spirit of our Puritan fathers. John Brown was a direct descendant of one of the Mayflower party, and in him, as completely as in any other man, we find incarnated the spirit and the true character of the Puritan. He shows to us the kind of manhood that we are thankful for.

Then, too, it shows to us the moral genius of the Unitarian movement, and its relation to the moral and ethical problems of the day. For Emerson, Parker, Thoreau, Alcott,³ and others of the Boston-Concord radicals, who have made the religious movements of those days significant, were Brown's advisors, and assisted him by strong financial support as well. James Freeman Clark and Edward Everett Hale⁴ were among his leading New England friends. To know what Brown did, and why he did it, is to know what these men were working for and why they were working. It takes into the atmosphere of great moral purpose and tremendous personalities.

John Brown was born at Torrington, Connecticut, May 9, 1800. In 1805 his family moved to Ohio, where he and his lived until 1855, when his sons, and later John Brown himself, moved to Kansas to become the leaders of the Free-soil war in that state. From that time until the Harper's Ferry raid, and his death, Kansas was his center of activity, and his home so far as he had any. Much of these years were spent, however, in carrying slaves across the border into Canada, and in trips to the Eastern

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Theodore Parker (1810-1860), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Amos Bronson Alcott (1799-1868) were all founders of American transcendentalism. All had ties to Unitarianism; Parker was a Unitarian minister, and Emerson had been for a time a Unitarian minister.

⁴ James Freeman Clark (1810-1888) American theologian and Unitarian minister in several congregations in Massachusetts, but also in Louisville, Kentucky; Edward Everett Hale (1822-1909) American author, historian and Unitarian minister in several Unitarian congregations in Massachusetts.

states for the purpose of raising money and lecturing. Boston, Concord and Springfield were his chief centers in the East. The home of Mrs. Stearns of Medford⁵ was where many of his meetings were held. He was hanged December 2 [1859] at Charlestown, Virginia.

Before stating anything connected with his work for freeing the slaves, it is well to note that he came of a noble, simple-lived, industrious family of farmers. He was one in whom the simple family affections took deep root. This is shown by his close and devoted friendship with his father, and with his own sons. The letters from him to his wife and children at home are full of the most genuine, and tender love and affections. In times of peace he would have been one of the quietest and most gentle souls. But there was in him the passion for freedom and justice, which carried him like a fearless giant to the gallows. Of education he had practically none. At one time he planned and began to study for the ministry, but an infirmity of the eyes prevented [it]. Nurtured in a home where an honest, sincere, human religious atmosphere obtained, and amid conditions that taxed his resources, he developed to his full capacity the true puritan spirit that filled his being. A letter written to the young son of his friend, Mrs. Stearns of Medford, shows at once his natural character. Tender, shy, yet courageous and bold, a pure idealist, and yet one who ever walked on the ground. Two incidents of his early life are here recorded by him, and are especially valuable in understanding his character.

When the war broke out with England, his father soon commenced furnishing the troops with beef cattle...⁶ John thus had opportunity to come in contact with the men and measures of war.

The effect of what he saw during the war was to so far disgust him with military affairs that he would neither train nor drill; but paid fines; and got along like a

⁵ Mrs. Mary Stearns (1821-1901) was the second wife of George L. Stearns (1809-1867); both were active abolitionists.

⁶ John Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, p. 14. The war mentioned is the War of 1812.

Quaker until his age finally had cleared him of military duty.⁷

Thus he spoke of himself, yet he was the leader of armed troops in Kansas.

One other event is noteworthy. He thus describes it.

During the war with England a circumstance occurred that in the end made him a most determined abolitionist, and led him to declare or swear: Eternal war with Slavery. He was staying for a short time with a very gentlemanly landlord since a United States Marshall who held a slave boy near his own age, very active, intelligent and good-feeling, and to whom John was under obligation for numerous little acts of kindness. The master made a great pet of John: ... while the negro boy (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed and lodged in cold weather; and beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came first to hand. This brought John to think of the wretched hopeless condition of Fatherless and Motherless slave children; for such children have neither Fathers or Mothers to protect and provide for them. He sometimes would raise the question, Is God their father?⁸

Thus the lad grew up, learning the Tanner's trade. All through his young manhood, he worked, entered into business, provided and cared for his family. During these years he lived a most quiet and humble, domestic life. His letters to his wife and children during these years are seething with simple straightforward parental love and interest. One line of work after another commanded his interest, but beneath all was the one underlying purpose of his life, to make a contribution to the freeing of the slaves. This was begun by domestic economy looking to the end of purchasing freedom for such slaves as he could raise money for. Then extending into the underground railway, etc. His interest in politics, not only domestic, but foreign, was keen, and marked by a far-sighted judgement as to

⁷ John Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, p. 14.

⁸ John Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, pp. 14-15.

the significance of contemporary events. Says F.B. Sanborn, in speaking of Brown's political sagacity, referring especially to Brown's comment on the European revolution of 1848,

But the pithy remark of John Brown, "God is carrying out his purposes in all them all" was as profitable an utterance as that of any scholar or statesman of the period. He belonged to the school of prophets, though a herdsman like Amos the Hebrew and Arabian seer.⁹

But even as Brown was growing, so also were the events of American history moving with tremendous rapidity towards the irrepressible conflict. For upwards of forty years now the vested interests of slavery in the south had been trying by compact and compromise to live in the same union with the free states of the north. Slavery was commercially valuable and morally acceptable to the south. It was commercially bad and morally repugnant to large sections of the north. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 simply delayed the struggle, and as events proved, was a virtual victory for the slave interests. The Squatter Sovereignty clause of the Kansas-Nebraska bill had left the decision as to whether new states should come in free of slave, to the votes of the settlers in those states admitted. When Kansas was opened to settlement in 1854 the purpose of this clause became apparent. The slave interests, who really had control of the government, meant to see to it that the vote of Kansas should be strongly pro-slave. David R. Atchison, Acting Vice-President of the United States, signed the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and within six months-time was devoting himself in public speech, urging the people of Missouri to go over into Kansas for a vote for slavery. You can, he said,

send five hundred of your young men, who will vote in favor of your institutions. Should each county in Missouri only do its duty, the question will be decided quietly and peaceably by the ballot box.¹⁰

⁹ John Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, p. 147.

¹⁰ David Rice Atchison (1807-1886) American politician, was a member of the Missouri House of Representatives from 1834-1841, and served as senator for Missouri for 1843-1855. He was President pro-tempore of the U.S. Senate from 1852 until 1854. The quotation can be found in William Phillips, *The Conquest of*

As the time approached the stress became more intense. General Stringfellow, a friend of Atchinson, and a leader of the boarder ruffians, said,

To those who have qualms of conscience as to violating laws, state or national, I say the time has come when such impositions must be disregarded, since your rights and property are in danger. And I advise you, one and all, to enter every election district in Kansas in defiance of Reeder, and his vile Myrmidons, and vote at the point of the bowie knife and revolver. Neither give nor take quarters. Our cause demands it. It is enough that the slave-holding interests wills it, from which there is no appeal.¹¹

Thus Kansas had become the center of the storm, and the intensity of feeling can be seen in the language just quoted.

By consent of parties, the present contest in Kansas is made the turning point in the destinies of slavery and abolitionism. If the south triumphs, abolitionism will be defeated and shorn of its power for all time. If she is defeated, abolitionism will grow more insolent and aggressive, until the utter ruin of the south is consummated.¹²

No one saw the truth of this statement better than John Brown and his sons. The sons, four in number, had settled in Kansas, and the father had followed them to take up the real great work of his life. He was fast coming to see the irrepressible conflict must begin in Kansas, and he was fast coming to a position of leadership among the staunchest of the free-soilers. The aggressiveness of the leaders of the border ruffians had become so intense, that Brown saw the necessity of more

Kansas by Missouri and Her Allies, Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Co., 1856, p. 43.

¹¹ Benjamin Franklin Stringfellow (1816-1891) pro-slavery border ruffian in Kansas, served as Missouri's Attorney General from 1845 until 1849. This quote is reported in the *New York Tribune* on March 26, 1855 from a speech in Stringfellow gave in St. Joseph, Missouri.

¹² Warren Wilkes, a South Carolinian, who for a time commanded an armed force of Carolina and George settlers in Kansas, wrote this to the *Charleston Mercury* in the spring of 1856. It is quoted in John Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, p. 166.

strenuous action than had yet been taken. In May 1856, hearing that a gang of the ruffians were to kill himself and others on a certain night, he went among them disguised as a surveyor, and had his information confirmed by words from their own mouths. Then during the time between May 23 and 25 occurred the famous executions at Pottawatomie of several of the leaders of the border ruffians. That John Brown was the leader and the instigator of this move is not to be denied. That it was done in a deliberate cool-headed fashion is also true. He was a hard thing, and has been severely criticized, but it saved the state of Kansas as a free state, and turned the tide against slavery. While his contemporaries condemned, I think that fair-minded judges later have come to see that this was merely a step of self-defense in the face of a deadly hostile enemy. The significant fact of all is this, that the long fight between freedom and slavery, which had been the football of congress and politicians, had now been carried to the field of battle and must be fought out to its bitter finish there. John Brown had been that agent.

For the following three years, Brown was occupied mostly in his preparations for the Harper's Ferry episode. His plan was [to] strike a blow against slavery. Just what he thought would happen, I am not sure about, but I think that he thought that he could gradually free the slaves and drive out slavery. At last, after long and careful preparation, he struck his famous blow, captured the arsenal at Harper's Ferry, and sent a cold deathly chill of fear through the whole slave territory. He was captured, cruelly treated, and murdered on the gallows. Thus his ignominious end.

But what was the worth of such a life? Why honor such a man? Victor Hugo, who was watching all these events in America with the keenest interest said,

Slavery in all its forms will disappear. What the South slew last December was not John Brown, but Slavery. Henceforth, no matter what President Buchanan may say in his shameful message, the American Union must be considered dissolved. Between the North and the South stands the gallows of Brown. Union is no longer possible: such a crime cannot be shared.¹³

¹³ Victor Hugo (1802-1885) French novelist and politician. This quotation can be found in John Brown, *The Life and Letters of*

How keen was the remark, and how true. The die had been cast, and the war was on, begun by a man who had had burned into his being in early manhood an utter loathing of war, and yet who had stood on the battlefield and seen his sons killed by his side. There is a pathos, and yet heroic bravery in the last words written by Brown on the day of his execution and handed to his jailor.

I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, and I now think vainly, flattered myself that without much bloodshed it might be done.¹⁴

That was his mission. To the very last he had thought, and so had the nation thought, that slavery might be abolished without bloodshed. It was the mission of Brown to reveal to the North the nature of the irrepressible conflict. No man ever fulfilled his mission with more unswerving loyalty to the truth as God had given him to see the truth. Turning his back on all the domestic life that he loved, and plunging into warfare and danger which he loathed, he had followed as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night¹⁵ his vision of a nation free from slavery. In him, and through him, the whole thing was elevated from the field of politics and commercialism to the field of ethics.

What shall we say of the man, as we look back at this distance? Many would be inclined to criticize and condemn, but to me Emerson's keen characterization holds true still:

For himself, Brown is so transparent that all men see him through. He is a man to make friends wherever on earth courage and integrity are esteemed,—the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own. Many of us have seen him, and everyone who has heard him speak has been impressed alike by his simple, artless goodness and his sublime courage. He joins that perfect Puritan faith which brought his ancestor to Plymouth Rock, with his grandfather's ardor in the Revolution. He believes in two articles—two instruments, shall I say?—the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence; and he used

John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, p. 631.

¹⁴ John Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, p. 517.

¹⁵ See Nehemiah 9:12.

this expression in a conversation concerning them:

"Better that a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death, than that one word of either should be violated in this country."¹⁶

Thus we come to the watchword of his life, freedom and justice. The passion for justice in freedom burned in his soul. He saved the nation. Himself he could not save.

This morning as we stop for a moment in the busy pace of our lives to think of the past, and to hope for the future, let us make place in our life for something of the spirit and the heroic courage and the tender sympathy of John Brown of Osawatomie. As we brood over these great souls that have passed, and the days that are no more, and breath again the passion for justice and freedom that fired their beings, and then turn from their heroic work for the nation to the dastardly betrayals, and the slimy writhing hands of fraud and corruption that are strangling the breath of freedom and justice from that very body politic which they built, the words of Lincoln come to our mind, calling us to the heroic task to see to it:

That these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.¹⁷

¹⁶ John Brown, *The Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia*, F.B. Sanborn, ed., Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, pp. 501-502.

¹⁷ Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) 16th President of the United States. These words are from his November 19, 1863 "Gettysburg Address."