

**“WHY LINCOLN STILL MATTERS”**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**  
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**January 17-18, 2009**

Call to Gather

“The struggle of today is not altogether for today; it is for a vast future also.”  
—Abraham Lincoln’s annual message to Congress, December 3, 1861<sup>1</sup>

Reading

“The Gettysburg Address” by Abraham Lincoln  
Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, 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 remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave 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.<sup>2</sup>

Sermon

Growing up, I heard lots of stories about Auntie Mae, a cherished friend of my father’s family. Though she wasn’t a blood relative, her designation as “Auntie” hints at how close she was to my Dad and to his family. She even babysat my Dad on occasions, like when his parents and older siblings went to Alaska. My grandfather and then my Dad

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Cuomo, *Why Lincoln Matters: Today More Than Ever* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), quote from title page.

<sup>2</sup> <http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>.

(when he grew into adulthood) offered a helping hand when she needed one. Auntie Mae died early in my lifetime; I have one very early, vague recollection of visiting her.

Auntie Mae's father served with distinction in the Union army during the Civil War. His name was Wallace W. Johnson. During the pivotal second day of the battle of Gettysburg, the twenty-year-old Sergeant Johnson and his fellow soldiers in the Sixth Pennsylvania Reserves arrived on the field of battle in the late afternoon or early evening. Much of the action on the second day of the battle focused on ferocious Confederate attempts to over-run the Union Army's exposed left flank anchored on a ridge called Little Round Top. Sergeant Johnson's unit arrived in time to help stop the Confederates' final assault on Little Round Top.

Sergeant Johnson and his comrades came under fire from Confederate sharpshooters concealed in a log house that was behind Confederate lines. Sharpshooters on both sides of the war had the ability to wreak havoc: they could pick off the enemy at 1000 yards. So it became obvious that someone had to do something to take these Confederate sharpshooters out of action. Sergeant Johnson and five others volunteered for the assignment. The six men moved stealthily toward the cabin but were quickly discovered. Somehow they kept moving forward in spite of coming under heavy fire. They rushed up to the house, knocked down barricades in front of the door, and succeeded in overcoming or capturing the sharpshooters concealed within the house. Even more amazingly, they brought more than a dozen prisoners with them back to Union lines.

Soon night fell over the field. The Union's left flank had held. As a result, the Union crucially still occupied the higher ground. The next day, Pickett's famous charge represented the "high water mark" of the Confederacy. The Confederate Army lost so much during that charge and in the whole three-day battle at Gettysburg that it would never again be an offensive fighting force. The beginning of the end of the Civil War dawned at Gettysburg. Pickett's charge ultimately failed for many reasons; one surely was the extraordinary work done by Sergeant Johnson and many others the day before to retain the advantageous high ground on the field.

Thirty-seven years later, Sergeant Johnson and his five comrades were awarded the Medal of Honor for their bravery at Gettysburg. Sergeant Johnson died eleven years after that.<sup>3</sup>

He passed on the Medal of Honor and another medal he won to Auntie Mae. Having no children of her own, she passed the medals onto my Dad. Several years ago, my Dad decided that I would be a good steward for the medals—probably because I had become a full-blown Civil War buff at an early age. So for these past ten or twelve years, the medals have mostly resided in my safe deposit box right here in Appleton.

Last spring it occurred to me that the medals deserve a better home. As someone shared at the Saturday service, the medals never really belonged to my family. They passed through our family. We cared for them. But they belong not to us but to the American people. It is time to give them to the people. So I got in touch with the museum staff at the Gettysburg National Military Park to see if they might be interested. This past Monday, one of my brothers and I traveled to the park and met with a curator

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<sup>3</sup> Noah Andre Trudeau, *Gettysburg: A Testing of Courage*, New York: Perennial, 2002), p. 390. I also draw for this section from several accounts of the battle and Sergeant Johnson's career and life which the Gettysburg National Military Park.

and the director of museum services. They told us that up until the last couple of years, they didn't have a single one of the sixty-three Medals of Honor earned at Gettysburg in their collection. Then out of the blue a Medal of Honor was donated. Sergeant Johnson's will soon become their second. I am hoping to travel back to the battlefield in the summer to donate the medals.

The museum staff pointed out on a map where Sergeant Johnson's heroic act took place, so my brother and I walked around in that part of the field. Walking on the hallowed ground where Sergeant Johnson fought, I was amazed to think how close we are to the Civil War and to the end of slavery. Sergeant Johnson's daughter babysat my Dad! I met her! The graying face of Johnson staring from a photograph we have speaks of a distant era, but the feeling of distance is deceiving. We are not very far removed from the Civil War.

President-elect Obama lifted up the same truth in his victory speech when he talked about the 106-year-old Ann Nixon Cooper and all that she had witnessed in her long life before she voted on November 4: woman's suffrage, "the despair in the dust bowl, and Depression across the land," bombs falling on "our harbor" and "the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma", a wall falling in Berlin.<sup>4</sup> Ann Nixon Cooper, removed from slavery by just one generation and unable to vote for much of her life because of racism and sexism, voted in the 2008 election that brought an American of African descent to office.

It felt appropriate to visit Gettysburg barely a week before this Tuesday's historic Inauguration. Without a victory at Gettysburg, the Union probably would not have won the war. And if the Union had not won the war, it seems unlikely we would have arrived at the point of inaugurating our first African American president.

Sure, the Civil War was just a beginning. It left in its wake far too much unfinished business. Rather than ushering in a new birth of freedom as Lincoln hoped, a hundred years of bitter segregation, lynching, poll taxes and tests and a myriad of other expressions of bigotry followed. The fiftieth anniversary commemoration at Gettysburg, which took place less than two years after Sergeant Johnson died, showed how far we had to go. Confederate and white Union veterans met as friends on the hallowed field, but absent and forgotten were the black comrades who did so much to win the war.<sup>5</sup> South and North were mired in segregation so fierce that an objective observer would have assumed the South had won the war. The dream of equality was nowhere to be seen at that reunion.

And so it took Martin Luther King, Jr. and the other Civil Rights era heroes and Shirley Chisholm and Jesse Jackson and Colin Powell and of course Barack Obama (to name just a few) to further the stalled work begun in the Civil War. And of course it took the nearly sixty-seven million voters who voted for Obama to bring us to this week's historic Inauguration.

So on Tuesday, a friend of Sergeant Johnson's daughter and his son will watch the Inauguration. The new occupants of the White House—a house built partly by the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2008/barackobamavictoryspeech.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001).

labor of slaves<sup>6</sup>—will be a man born of a white Kansan mother and a Kenyan father, a woman herself descended from slaves, and their two daughters. While the task advanced at Little Round Top (and Vicksburg and the Wilderness and Appomatox Courthouse and Montgomery and Selma) will by no means be completed on Tuesday, it does represent a giant step forward. This giant step has been a long time in coming: there is no doubt about that. Yet many of us honestly are amazed it came at all in our lifetimes.

As Barack Obama takes the oath of office on Tuesday, my thoughts will partly be back at Gettysburg, and at Montgomery and Selma. The Civil War and the Civil Rights movement continue to live on powerfully in the collective memory of this nation. And towering over that memory are the twin figures of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. On Monday—Inauguration Eve—we celebrate the birthday of Dr. King. And next month, we celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of Lincoln’s birth. Today, an Inaugural event on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial—the same steps from which King electrified the nation with his “I Have a Dream” speech—will pay tribute to both of these towering figures.

That Lincoln continues to tower over our nation has been so evident these past two years. A resident of Illinois, Sen. Obama chose the old state capitol building in Springfield as the backdrop for declaring his candidacy—a building in which Lincoln served, a building located just a few blocks from Lincoln’s home. From beginning to end of the campaign, Obama echoed Lincoln’s dream of bringing together in unity our disparate nation. These sentiments were at the forefront of Obama’s victory speech in Chicago when he quoted Lincoln’s inaugural speeches: “We are not enemies, but friends.” “Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.” And he alluded to the Gettysburg Address when he lifted up “the millions of Americans who volunteered, and organized, and proved that, more than two centuries later, a government of the people, by the people and for the people has not perished from this Earth.”<sup>7</sup> The Lincoln theme has continued in the transition as Obama has gone about the important work of assembling his cabinet: he has been guided by Lincoln’s decision to create a team out of his political rivals. The photograph in the front of the *Post-Crescent* today captures beautifully Obama’s connection with Lincoln: the photograph shows Obama from behind as he looks up at Lincoln’s mighty statue in the Lincoln Memorial.<sup>8</sup>

Why does Abraham Lincoln still matter so much, to Obama and to our nation? He still matters because of four things: his words, his political skill, his leadership, and—most of all—his ideas.

Obama’s victory speech was a reminder that words still do matter. So was his speech last spring on racism, a speech which not only rescued his candidacy from the dustbin of Rev. Wright’s “God damn America!” but also articulated and advanced America’s self-understanding of its racist history. Writing about his victory speech a few days afterward, James Wood of the *New Yorker* writes:

A theatre critic once memorably complained of a bad play that it had not been a good night out for the English language. Among other triumphs,

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.njournalg.com/SlavesBuilttheWhiteHouse.htm>.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99353053&ft=1&f=1015>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2008/barackobamavictoryspeech.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> *Post-Crescent*, January 18, 2009, p. A1.

last Tuesday night was a very good night for the English language. A movement in American politics hostile to the possession and the possibility of words—it had repeatedly disparaged Barack Obama as “just a person of words”—was not only defeated but embarrassed by a victory speech eloquent in echo, allusion, and counterpoint.<sup>9</sup>

More than any president before him save perhaps Thomas Jefferson, Lincoln understood the power and promise of words. In the Gettysburg Address he modestly downplayed the significance of his words—it wasn't they, after all, that turned back Pickett's Charge or the assault on Little Round Top. But make no mistake: he meant for his few but very carefully crafted words to fundamentally recast the American experiment. With a two-to-three minute speech, he intended nothing less than the rewriting of the American creed. With those 272 words, he successfully cleansed the Constitution of its catastrophic waffling on slavery and inserted instead the proposition that all are created equal as the centerpiece of the American creed. As Gary Wills writes about the onlookers at Gettysburg that day:

The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on a hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America.<sup>10</sup>

He used words “to complete the work of the guns” at Gettysburg.<sup>11</sup> Without those words, I don't know that we'd be at the point of having an African American move into the White House. How much more power could words have?

Lincoln still matters because he was a politician with extraordinary skills. What made this all the more remarkable—and surprising to his rivals who continually underestimated him—was that he showed little evidence of this in his mostly unsuccessful political life prior to the presidential campaign. His detailed knowledge of the electoral map—which went down to the level of counties and even precincts—may be unrivaled among presidents. Assembling a cabinet largely made up of talented (and egotistical) rivals who thought he as a bumbling idiot was a stroke of genius. But making it work without the cabinet falling into a dysfunctional mess required even more political skill. So did conducting the long and difficult war without totally losing the American public. All presidents since, when confronted with crises of their own, have looked back at the Lincoln political playbook for ideas and inspiration.

And Lincoln was equally gifted as a leader. He was skilled at improvisation—an important leadership quality especially in a time of crisis. And he successfully balanced many competing needs and interests. Winning the Civil War required a constantly delicate balancing act. He is sometimes faulted for not issuing the Emancipation Declaration sooner, but he knew that to do so would risk pushing the border states into

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<sup>9</sup> James Wood, “Victory Speech,” *The New Yorker*.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99353053&ft=1&f=1015>.

<sup>10</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

the Confederacy—and that their defection might well be a death blow to the Union cause. But then he knew when the political (not to mention military) positives of the Emancipation Declaration outweighed the potential negatives. As Mario Cuomo points out in his book *Why Lincoln Matters* (which inspired this sermon), Lincoln knew when to be aggressive and when to be conciliatory.<sup>12</sup> He also balanced a willingness to hear differing opinions with decisiveness. Maybe most importantly, he combined a grand vision for where he wanted the country to head with a keen sense of what the very next concrete steps were to get there. As Cuomo notes, Lincoln had a vision of the future that was “large, inspiring, clear, and achievable.”<sup>13</sup> He had tenacity, courage, appeared even-keeled, and knew how to be out front but not too far out front of the people.

And most importantly, Lincoln still matters because of his ideas. In recent years he has been rightfully faulted for the racism that pervaded much of his thinking. While this racism was not uncommon at the time, there were certainly many Abolitionists who were far ahead of Lincoln in overcoming racism. As Cuomo asserts, Lincoln’s views on race would disqualify him for office today. But fortunately the better angels of his nature eventually won out, and he moved from more racism to less racism in his final years. Those words about all being created equal began to take a firmer hold in his heart and mind.

What Lincoln sought most of all was a central idea worthy of this nation.<sup>14</sup> In the idea of equality, he found such an idea. This is the great idea he articulated at Gettysburg. This is the great idea which became central to the Civil War and led to the abolition of slavery. This is the idea for which he was killed. This is the idea that fueled the sacred work of the Civil Rights movement. And two hundred years after Lincoln’s birth, this is the idea that will be embodied so powerfully on Tuesday in the person of Barack Obama, and, even more importantly, in the nation that looked past its racism and elected him.

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<sup>12</sup> Cuomo, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.