Speech on John Brown

Source: This speech was delivered by abolitionist Frederick Douglass in Boston on the evening of December 3, 1860. That morning, an abolitionist meeting to commemorate the life of John Brown had been violently disrupted by a mob of anti-abolition and anti-Lincoln protesters. Douglass wasn’t able to give his speech in the morning, so he made it in the evening at a different location, a black Baptist church.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I occupied considerable attention this morning, and I do not feel called upon to take up much of the time this evening. There are other gentlemen here from whom I desire to hear, and to whom, I doubt not, you wish to listen. This is a meeting to discuss the best method of abolishing slavery, and each speaker is expected to present what he thinks is the best way of helping the anti-slavery movement.

From my heart of hearts I approve of all methods of proceeding against slavery: politics, religion, peace, war, Bible, Constitution, disunion, Union. [Laughter from the audience.] Every possible way known in opposition to slavery is my way. But the moral and social means of opposing slavery have had more attention, during the last twenty five years, than the John Brown way. This is a recent way of opposing slavery. Since we have had a mob in Boston today as a reaction to what John Brown did, I think I should spend my speech advocating John Brown’s way of accomplishing our goal. [Applause.]

We have seen, for the last sixty years, resistance to slavery in the United States. As early as the beginning of the U.S. Government, there were abolition societies in the land. These societies made arguments against slavery by talking about justice and humanity. They tried to ask for generosity from slaveholders and from the nation; they tried to talk about the Christianity of the South and the nation. Pictures of slavery were presented. The ten thousand terrible acts daily occurring in the Southern States were held up—men sold on the auction block—women scourged with a heavy lash—men tied to the stake and deliberately burned, the blood gushing from their nose and eyes, asking rather to be shot than to be murdered by such slow torture. The facts of slavery have been flung before the public by ten thousand eloquent lips, and by more than ten thousand eloquent pens. Four millions have bowed before this nation, and with uplifted hands to Heaven and to you, have asked, in the name of God, and in the name of humanity, to break our chains!

To this hour, however, the nation has ignored these cries for help, coming up from the South; and instead of the slaveholders becoming softened, they have become madder and madder. The slaveholder has become harder and harder, with every appeal made to his sense of justice, with every appeal made to his humanity, and now he argues that it is right and just in the eyes of God to rob a man of his liberty and pocket the fruits of his labor without giving him compensation for his work. Educated men have come out in open defense of the slave system. Not only is this the case, but the submission of the slave to his chains is held as an evidence of the fact that he should be a slave.

Now what remains? What remains? It is possible for men to trample on justice and liberty for so long that they forget the principles of justice and liberty. Here is an example: You meet a man on the sidewalk, in the morning, and you give him the way. He thanks you for it. You meet him again, and
you give him the way, and he may thank you for it, but with a little less emphasis than at first. Meet him again, and give him the way, and he almost forgets to thank you for it. Meet him again, and give him the way, and he begins to claim the inside of the sidewalk as his right. This is human nature; this is the nature of the slaveholders.

Now, something must be done to make these slaveholders feel the injustice of their actions. We must reach the slaveholder’s conscience through his fear of personal danger. We must make him feel that there is death in the air about him, that there is death all around him. We must do this in some way. It can be done. The Negroes of the South must do this; they must make these slaveholders feel that there is something uncomfortable about slavery. They must make the slaveholders feel that it is not so pleasant to be required to go to bed with revolvers and pistols, which they must do because they are afraid of their slaves. This can be done, and will be done and yes, I say, will be done. [Cheers.] However, don’t think that this suggestion of mine means that the various other political and moral efforts to end slavery are bad.

I believe in agitation; and it was largely this belief which brought me five hundred miles from my home to attend this meeting. I say that I want the slaveholders to be made uncomfortable. Every slave that escapes helps to add to their discomfort. I rejoice in every uprising at the South. Although the men may be shot down, they may be butchered upon the spot, the blow will cause change. Slaveholders sleep more uneasily than they used to. They are more careful to check that the doors are locked than they formerly were. They are more careful to know that their knives are sharp; they are more careful to know that their pistols are loaded. This element will play its part in the abolition of slavery.

I know that there is no hope of a general insurrection. We do not need a general insurrection to bring about this result. We only need slaveholders in the Southern States to know that their slaves can find liberty in the mountains, planted by John Brown. If the slaveholders knew that there were men hiding in the mountains who would come down and take their slaves from the chains that bind them, slavery would be dead. It could not live in the presence of such a danger.

Some are worried about the dissolution of the Union. My opinion is that if we could have an abolition government that would force the South to behave herself and end slavery, I would support the continuance of the Union. But since we have what we have, I shall be glad of the news, whenever it comes, that the slave States have seceded, and that Northerners are no longer called upon to deliver fugitive slaves to their masters. [Applause.] In case of such a dissolution, I believe a leader would arise who would march into those Southern States with a thousand men to accomplish the freedom of the slave. [Cheers.]

We should appeal to the moral sense of these slaveholders, but we should also appeal to their fears. The only way to make the Fugitive Slave Law a dead law is to make a few dead slave-catchers. [Laughter and applause.] There is no need to kill them either—shoot them in the legs, and send them to the South as examples of the free gospel preached here at the North. [Renewed laughter.]

But, I am occupying too much time. [“Go on!” “Go on!”] But I hope to speak in Boston on Friday. Therefore, I will not prolong my remarks further. I thank you for this hearing. [Applause.]
advocate = to argue for
trample = to cause damage by stepping heavily on something or someone
conscience = the part of your mind that makes you aware of whether something is morally right or wrong
agitation = shaking things up
insurrection = rebellion
dissolution = end of
appeal to = call upon; talk about; stir up