

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, PLEA FOR FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN BOSTON (1860)

On December 3, 1860, Frederick Douglass and a group of fellow abolitionists met at the Tremont Temple Baptist Church in Boston for a discussion centered around the following question: “How Can Slavery Be Abolished?” They scheduled this meeting on the one-year anniversary of John Brown’s death. It occurred at a time of great peril for the nation. One month earlier, Abraham Lincoln was elected as the first anti-slavery president in American history. But following Lincoln’s election, South Carolina quickly declared its intention to secede from the Union. And many assumed that other Southern States would soon follow suit. In this context, the Boston abolitionist meeting was greeted by a violent mob. The mob took the stage and shut down the meeting. Six days later, Douglass delivered a previously scheduled lecture at Boston’s Music Hall. Following his prepared remarks, Douglass ended with an admonition to his audience—and to the nation—about the importance of free speech and the exchange of ideas in a democratic society.

Excerpt:

Even in an enlightened city like Boston, mob violence threatens abolitionist assemblies.

Boston is a great city and Music Hall has a fame almost as extensive as that of Boston. Nowhere more than here have the principles of human freedom been expounded. But for the circumstances already mentioned, it would seem almost presumption for me to say anything here about those principles. And yet, even here, in Boston, the moral atmosphere is dark and heavy. The principles of human liberty, even if correctly apprehended, find but limited support in this hour of trial. The world moves slowly, and Boston is much like the world. We thought the principle of free speech was an accomplished fact. Here, if nowhere else, we thought the right of the people to assemble and to express their opinion was secure. Dr. Channing had defended the right, Mr. Garrison had practically asserted the right, and Theodore Parker had maintained it with steadiness and fidelity to the last.

Mob violence takes away our free speech rights. But here we are to-day contending for what we thought we gained years ago. The mortifying and disgraceful fact stares us in the face, that though Faneuil Hall and the Bunker Hill Monument stand, freedom of speech is struck down. No lengthy detail of facts is needed. They are already notorious; far more so than will be wished ten years hence.

A mob closed down our meeting, and the mayor didn’t protect us; it wasn’t a mob of the lowly, but instead a mob of gentlemen. The world knows that last Monday a meeting assembled to discuss the question: “How Shall Slavery Be Abolished?” The world also knows that that meeting was invaded, insulted, captured by a mob of gentlemen, and thereafter broken up and dispersed by the order of the mayor, who refused to protect it, though called upon to do

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so. If this had been a mere outbreak of passion and prejudice among the baser sort, maddened by rum and hounded on by some wily politician to serve some immediate purpose, – a mere exceptional affair, – it might be allowed to rest with what has already been said. But the leaders of the mob were gentlemen. They were men who pride themselves upon their respect for law and order.

Slavery conflicts with free speech and assembly rights. These gentlemen brought their respect for the law with them and proclaimed it loudly while in the very act of breaking the law. Theirs was the law of slavery. The law of free speech and the law for the protection of public meetings they trampled under foot, while they greatly magnified the law of slavery. . . .

The Founders valued free speech above all; it is the key to making society better, preventing tyranny, and ending slavery. No right was deemed by the fathers of the Government more sacred than the right of speech. It was in their eyes, as in the eyes of all thoughtful men, the great moral renovator of society and government. Daniel Webster called it a homebred right, a fireside privilege. Liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist. That, of all rights, is the dread of tyrants. It is the right which they first of all strike down. They know its power. Thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers, founded in injustice and wrong, are sure to tremble, if men are allowed to reason of righteousness, temperance, and of a judgment to come in their presence. Slavery cannot tolerate free speech. Five years of its exercise would banish the auction block and break every chain in the South. They will have none of it there, for they have the power. But shall it be so here?

Some attack our meeting as poorly timed and unwise. Even here in Boston, and among the friends of freedom, we hear two voices: one denouncing the mob that broke up our meeting on Monday as a base and cowardly outrage; and another, deprecating and regretting the holding of such a meeting, by such men, at such a time. We are told that the meeting was ill-timed, and the parties to it unwise.

We need to defend free speech rights now (and firmly). Why, what is the matter with us? Are we going to palliate and excuse a palpable and flagrant outrage on the right of speech, by implying that only a particular description of persons should exercise that right? Are we, at such a time, when a great principle has been struck down, to quench the moral indignation which the deed excites, by casting reflections upon those on whose persons the outrage has been committed? After all the arguments for liberty to which Boston has listened for more than a quarter of a century, has she yet to learn that the time to assert a right is the time when the right itself is called in question, and that the men of all others to assert it are the men to whom the right has been denied?

Free speech rights are for everyone, not just the elite. It would be no vindication of the right of speech to prove that certain gentlemen of great distinction, eminent for their learning and ability, are allowed to freely express their opinions on all subjects – including the subject of

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slavery. Such a vindication would need, itself, to be vindicated. It would add insult to injury. Not even an old-fashioned abolition meeting could vindicate that right in Boston just now. There can be no right of speech where any man, however lifted up, or however humble, however young, or however old, is overawed by force, and compelled to suppress his honest sentiments.

Free speech violations don't just harm the speaker, but also the listener. Equally clear is the right to hear. To suppress free speech is a double wrong. It violates the rights of the hearer as well as those of the speaker. It is just as criminal to rob a man of his right to speak and hear as it would be to rob him of his money. I have no doubt that Boston will vindicate this right. But in order to do so, there must be no concessions to the enemy. When a man is allowed to speak because he is rich and powerful, it aggravates the crime of denying the right to the poor and humble.

Again, free speech rights are for everyone. The principle must rest upon its own proper basis. And until the right is accorded to the humblest as freely as to the most exalted citizen, the government of Boston is but an empty name, and its freedom a mockery. A man's right to speak does not depend upon where he was born or upon his color. The simple quality of manhood is the solid basis of the right – and there let it rest forever.

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**