

When We See a Memorial: A Memorial Day Sermon

Joshua 4:5-7
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Mike Baker was the last man in Barbour County, Alabama drafted into the Vietnam War. He is my second cousin. Before he went off to war, I spent some time with him at church and at his house. When I started going to youth choir, Mike would drive me to church.

Mike gave me an old Confederate Flag before he went off to Vietnam and I took it with me to college. I hung it up in my dorm room. I thought it was cool.

One day a friend came into my room and saw my flag and asked me if I hated black people. "Hate them? I grew up with them. I played ball with them. I worked in the lumber mill with them. I have a lot of black friends," I said.

"Well, why are you displaying that flag?" he asked.

I was naïve, I guess. I was born in the same county as George C. Wallace, so maybe I could use that as an excuse. That friend's comment was my introduction to the debate over the Confederate flag. That was over 30 years ago.

In Southern states, battles have been fought for years over the Confederate flag. Its meaning and symbolism changed after white supremacy groups and hate groups adopted the flag as their symbol, making it very difficult for others to associate the flag merely with Southern heritage and as the historical flag of the Confederacy.

As divisive as the battle over removal of the flag has been in public arenas, the battle in recent years has shifted to the removal of Confederate monuments.

These issues are not happening above the Mason Dixon Line. I think the reason Civil War monuments are not under siege in the North is that the public seems to see the monuments as honoring of those who died fighting in the Civil War for a moral issue, the abolition of slavery.

People in the North are not upset about these monuments and so they are left alone. Whether I'm right or I'm wrong, I'll leave it up to you to decide. In the South, it has become difficult for our Confederate monuments to just focus on honoring the dead. While most Confederate monuments do memorialize some Confederate hero or the many soldiers who died in the war, not all of them do.

One of the monuments recently removed in New Orleans, the Battle of Liberty Place, memorialized a group of Confederate veterans who stormed the statehouse in 1874 inflicting about 100 casualties, because they did not like the newly established government set up after the war.

They held the statehouse, the armory, and downtown for three days, retreating only after Federal troops came and restored the elected government.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Liberty_Place)

“In 1932, the city added an inscription that expressed a white supremacist view.” It took over 40 years before another marker was added explaining that the inscription did not express the feelings of the people of New Orleans.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_supremacy)

Timothy Tyson, an author and researcher at Duke University, points out that most of the Civil War Monuments in North Carolina were erected decades after the war ended when White Supremacy campaigns seized power. (News & Record Civil War Monuments: Timothy B. Tyson., August 16, 2015)

He argues that the monuments mark the ascendancy of white supremacy as much as they mark the contributions of Confederate soldiers. (Ibid)

This is likely true throughout the South. This is baggage that Northern Civil War monuments do not have.

People in the North don't have memories of a David Duke holding KKK rallies around a Civil Rights Monument like they do in New Orleans around the Battle of Liberty Place. A lot of people now see Southern Civil War monuments as symbols of hate, bigotry, and intolerance. They can no longer see the markers as memorials to the huge loss of life the war inflicted on mostly poor whites who never owned a slave and never would.

Lest we forget, casualties of this war also included many slaves who fought alongside of their owners in the South and freed slaves who fought for the North.

The Civil War is still the war that killed the largest number of Americans in our history. Only recently has the number of dead Americans in all other wars combined exceeded the dead from our darkest hour as a nation. Many of us here likely have ancestors who fought in the Civil War. Many of you might not even know it.

Therefore, to remove all our monuments to those who fought and died in this war would be misguided, but we must also recognize that our monuments do make statements about who we are as a people and they also send messages to future generations. The question we need to ask is "What message do we want to send?"

With that in mind Tyson says that just as we erred in the way and spirit in which we placed many of our Civil War memorials, we have made mistakes in failing to erect others.

He says that in North Carolina there are roughly 100 Confederate monuments, most of them on public property, five on the Capitol grounds in Raleigh, where they would seem to represent the people of the state. (News & Record Civil War Monuments: Timothy B. Tyson., August 16, 2015)

However, he says there are no monuments to the enslaved that built their state. He says there is no monument to the interracial Reconstruction government of the late 1860s, in which blacks and whites came together to write their constitution, which included the first free, tax-supported public schools until they were overthrown amid a ruthless campaign of Ku Klux Klan violence. (Ibid)

He says there are no monuments on their courthouse lawns to the interracial civil rights movement or the heroes of that movement. (Ibid)

So if our monuments tell a story to future generations, the questions he proposes are these: “What stories are we telling?” If we are not telling the stories we want future generations to learn, “What stories do we want to tell?”

We should never ignore our past and part of not ignoring it is to acknowledge all aspects of it, as truthfully and as honestly as possible. That includes the sinfulness of it, the ugliness of it, and the heroism of those who gave us the freedoms we now enjoy so that we can commit ourselves to those things which are right, better, brighter, healing, hopeful, meaningful, and Christlike.

When Joshua led the Children of Israel across the Jordan River, God miraculously caused the river to back up and they walked across on dry ground. He instructed a man from each tribe to take a stone on his shoulder from the middle of the river bed. It was to serve as a sign, so in the future, “when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ 7 tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever.” (Joshua 4:5-7 NIV)

Memorials are important. They tell a story. They tell a story to future generations.

Joshua wanted the stones from the middle of the river to be placed in the middle of the camp as a reminder to future generations that God had provided for the needs of the people.

This was an extremely important message. These stone had a message. It was a message about that day. But these stones would have also told a message about the past. For if they had believed in God’s power and obeyed him 40 years earlier, they would not have spent a generation in the wilderness.

Forty years earlier Moses sent 12 spies over into that land, one of them being Joshua. God had promised the land to them. Only Joshua and Caleb came back from their mission and reported that they could take the land with God’s help. Everyone else refused to go and even threatened to kill Joshua and Caleb if they didn’t back off their campaign to take the land.

The result was 40 years of desert living. Moses died with the promise that the people would get to the new land, but without him.

Forty years older, Joshua led them into the promised land and the message he wanted this monument to tell future generations was that God had provided for the needs of the people.

God provided for them as slaves in Egypt.

God provided a way for them to escape from Pharaoh under Moses' leadership.

God provided a way for them through the Red Sea.

After they refused to follow him over into the Promised Land, God still provided for them for 40 years in the wilderness, an act of grace on God's part.

God provided for them to cross the Jordan River at flood stage.

God provided for them by giving them the land he promised their ancestors.

The small monument they erected in the camp from the stones they pulled from the Jordan River bed had a huge story to tell.

The story it told was one that glorified God, but it also painfully reminded future generations of the disobedience of a generation of people that died in the wilderness needlessly.

If our memorials do their job, they remind us that past generations have lived and sacrificed, many giving the ultimate sacrifice of lives for their country, but that does not mean that every person that has lived and sacrificed always did so for reasons that we now believe are moral or just.

It is important for us to be intentional to use memorials as teaching moments with our children. They can remind us of the courage and valor of those who fought and died, even those who fought in wars we can now see was riddled with flawed theology, philosophy, and principles.

Joshua intended the memorial of stones from the Jordan to be a living, teaching, and observation station. We must do a good job interpreting memorials for future generations and placing them in their proper context.

We must also know enough about history to remind our children of memorials that have not been erected, to those heroes of our nation, faith, family, and local history that others have forgotten or failed to recognize.

Remembering is important. If it were not so, Nehemiah would not have prayed, "Remember me with favor, O my God," as he prepared to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13:31 NIV).

Jeremiah would not have prayed, "LORD, you understand; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors. You are long-suffering--do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake" (Jeremiah 15:15 NIV).

When Jesus broke bread with his disciples for the last time, he would not have said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19 NIV).

One of the thieves who died beside Jesus would not have said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42 NIV).

When you stop and notice a memorial, read what it says. Try to understand the context of when it was placed. Remember those who made contributions for you, for me, for us all. Give thanks for their lives, for their lives and sacrifices, which have bearing on our lives today.

Understand that as time moves on we do interpret the past differently. While that doesn't diminish the sacrifices made by those who came before us, it might mean that we make greater efforts to interpret the meaning of earlier sacrifices for current and future generations, both those that we have memorialized and those we have not.

May we all take such opportunities to ask God to remember us, to take care of us, to remember us with favor, even with all with our flaws, prejudices, and our inability to hear and understand the past as others do, not just for our sake, but for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

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