

TIME MAKES ANCIENT GOOD UNCOUTH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Exodus 17:2-7; I Corinthians 1:18-28

There is an old hymn that is not in the new hymnal, for obvious reasons, it's masculine references too exclusive to be expressed in the same way today. The hymn is "Once to Every Man and Nation" and the words are...

Once to every man and nation
comes the moment to decide,
in the strife of truth with falsehood
for the good or evil side.
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
offering each the bloom or blight,
and the choice goes by forever,
'twixt that darkness and that light.

And here let me give a spoiler alert that the American Romantics of the 19th Century loved gore and militant triumphalism in their hymns. So the third verse gets down to business:

By the light of burning martyrs,
Christ your bleeding feet we track
toiling up new Calvaries ever
with the cross that turns not back.
New occasions teach new duties,
time makes ancient good uncouth;
they must upward still and onward,
who would keep abreast of truth.¹

It's got a tune that suggests a march, a drumbeat and I remember as a kid learning this hymn and linking the moment to decide with a decision for Christ which of course was the dividing line between salvation and damnation in the church where I grew up. Except that there was this moral tone to the hymn which gave it some grounding in daily life. The decisions we make have eternal weight, but the tricky part is that time makes ancient good uncouth, and that's the fly in the ointment.

We make decisions that set us in one camp or another, that sometimes make us choose between the obvious good and the apparent wrong. But sometimes the choices are more subtle and it's hard to know which is the evil thing and which the right when nuance shades the borders between the two. Which is why James Russell Lowell makes us remember the complexity of our decisions. After all, *time makes ancient good uncouth*.

Uncouth is a word that we seldom use here in Greenwich Village or even in New York, with our gay pride parade and our Halloween festivities, our blue and green and yellow hair, our body piercings. In this sanctuary there is more skin ink than in most congregations, I would think, and more indeterminate living situations – our forebears would have been in a twist about today's congregation, I suspect. Certainly Dr. Fosdick and Charles Parkhurst and John Rodgers, the old saints long in their graves, might have been shocked were they to walk into our sanctuary, their sanctuary, today. Of course, we'd be shocked to see them, too, but for a very different reason.

This August was a ripe time for preaching, so many issues that flew past us day by day. So many decisions for the good or the evil. The increasing threat of nuclear attack in the Pacific, the possibility that an ICBM may soon be able to reach Los Angeles or Guam or Tokyo, or Chicago, not to mention 12th Street and Fifth Avenue.

And then there was Charlottesville. Oh my Lord, Charlottesville.

And DACA this past week. And now the storms and hurricanes and earthquakes. Every few days, some new and enormous change demands our attention and makes us ask recurring questions about God and ourselves

and our world. It is a critical time in our history as a nation and as a church and you come and I come as people of faith each week trying to make sense of our lives and of our world. We grab onto our tiny life preserver in the ocean with 100 mile an hour winds coming at us and nothing seems secure.

Barbara and Will did a great job while I was away preaching to these issues that rock our world, but I confess that I was itching to get back here as well to say whatever I could about these matters that shape our lives.

Chaos reigns, not just in the storms but in daily life and hourly headlines, and the gospel has never been more needed than it is today... for correction, understanding, hope. We need to be clear about who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ, because the forces of culture, wealth and poverty, truth and justice, fairness and honesty are being blown sideways like palm trees caught in the swirling calamity of Hurricane Irma.

So keeping our bearings amid any one and amid all of the issues that are weighing on us in these days is crucial. How do we maintain our faith and be true to the Word and example of Jesus Christ when all seems so chaotic?

As a point of reference, I want to take just one of the issues that arose this summer, one of the underlying issues that emerged in Charlottesville and look at it from a Christian perspective.

As we all now know, there has been in Charlottesville a statue of Robert E. Lee dedicated in 1924. And like any work of art, or sculpture, it evokes a response and invites the observer to give meaning and context to the object. Thus the issue is engaged. Symbols have power. And the city council in Charlottesville after repeated requests going back a number of years, decided last March to remove the statue of General Lee because of the associations ascribed to the statue, and the implied meanings which were hurtful to many.

For some it was a statue that evoked an era long past and a choice once made by General Lee, a choice against the Union and for the Confederacy, which is to say, for slavery. Inherent in that choice was a cost that took an enormous toll on human life in the North and the South, more lives lost than in any other war in American history. A recent estimate is perhaps 750,000 soldiers and civilians.

There was, as we know a badly staged and managed confrontation between people in Charlottesville who – how shall we say it? – supported the Lee statue, and those who wished to see it removed. Underneath the statue controversy was the larger issue of an underground movement of people in the Alt Right who are proudly racists and Neo-Nazi's (to use the labels that the President used). The Lee statue symbolized for them white supremacy, white power, a cherished hero with an almost sacred name in the South because of his decision to defend slavery and the people who took it for granted.

We know what happened then in Charlottesville, a white supremacist, a terrorist drove his car into the crowd, injuring many, killing one, Heather Heyer, and two state troopers who died accidentally as well. The aftermath made it worse. An equivocating speech by the President about violence “on many sides.” Followed by a more “unifying” speech clearly written by staff members, followed by a speech the next day that undid all the good done by the intervening speech.

And all this over a statue... because symbols have power and they express values that define our character.

I will be honest with you. I have probably passed in my lifetime many monuments and statues to Confederate soldiers and never paid any attention.

But during those troublesome days in Charlottesville, I heard an NPR interview with a *nephew* (several generations past) of Robert E. Lee. It was an interview with Rev. Robert Wright Lee, IV. He is a Christian minister and he spoke as one who had an emotional stake in the meaning of the Lee statue in Charlottesville. He said,

“I think it's time that we have a conversation about how to remember our past without commemorating our past.... this is a form of idolatry, very plain[ly] and simply. We have made an idol of Robert [E.] Lee. ... an idol of white supremacy.... of nationalism... of bigotry and... hate.... And that's unacceptable. ... not only as a person of goodwill but for me as a Christian, I can no longer sit by and allow my family's name to be used as hate-filled speech.”²

I also heard an interview with an African American woman who said that as she walked past the statue on her way to work at 5:00 o'clock in the morning each day, going to the hospital where she cleans toilets, empties urinals, changes patients' beds, serves meals to ill folks who can't hold a fork, all to keep her children in pre-school... that woman said that when she walked past the statue of General Lee, she knew that is revered as an expression of power that keeps her in her place. Now that's not a perspective that most white people have about that statue, but if you walk in her shoes you see things in a different perspective. Time makes ancient good uncouth.

Symbols have power and meaning, which is why art and the feelings and emotions and history and the stories that they represent impact us in powerful ways.

Lee was a complex man, and David Brooks, the columnist, is right when he says that each generation must be careful as to how it reveres and remembers its heroes and villains. Time, after all, makes ancient good uncouth.

Brooks, in an article of two years ago wrote of Lee,

Like Lincoln he did not believe African-Americans were yet capable of equality. Unlike Lincoln he accepted the bondage of other human beings with bland complaisance. [Lee's] wife inherited 196 slaves from her father. Her father's will (somewhat impractically) said they were to be freed, but Lee didn't free them.

Lee didn't enjoy owning slaves, but he was considered a hard taskmaster and he did sell some, breaking up families. Moreover, he supported the institution of slavery as a pillar of Confederate life... He fundamentally believed the existence of slavery was, at least for a time, God's will.

Every generation [Brooks goes on] has a duty to root out the stubborn weed of prejudice from the culture. We do that, in part, through expressions of admiration and disdain. Given our history, it seems right to aggressively go the extra mile to show that prejudice is simply unacceptable, no matter how fine a person might otherwise be.³

So Brooks offers a proposal that...

most Confederate memorials [be kept] out of respect for the common soldiers. We should keep Lee's name [he proposes] on institutions that reflect postwar service, like Washington and Lee University, where he was president. But we should remove Lee's name from most schools, roads and other institutions, where the name could be seen as acceptance of what he did and stood for during the war.⁴

For me, that is too nuanced and obscure. It quickly becomes a distinction without a difference.

I like what the University of Texas has done which is not to topple or destroy the statues but to collect them, statues of General Lee and two others, and place them together in a hall that remembers that part of American history, so that the statues can be seen in the context of their place in an American history that has had glorious moments and heart wrenchingly sad moments as well.

Here's the point. We cannot hide either as a nation, or as people of God a history that we all know has flaws and scars and wrong and, yes, sin, in it. The story today from the book of Exodus is a good example of the power of a public marker and the futility of pretending that our sin and error never happened.

The story of Israel, led out of Egypt, and guided meanderingly toward the Promised Land is a story about a people who rebelled against God and against their leader, Moses. People who collected their jewelry and melted their bling so that they could make a God that suited them better, and thus bow down to the Golden Calf they forged. They looked back over their shoulders at the good old days in a monumental revision of their story, longing for the days of slavery, when they didn't have to eat the boring and familiar manna and quail every day. People whose faith flagged and who were grasping at straws for a better God than the one who had led them out to the wilderness.

And when they got out in the desert and the water was scarce and they were thirsty and their cattle ready to fall over, their ribs sticking out; they were ready to kill Moses, stone him to death -so frightened and vulnerable and worried were they. So, Moses prayed to God like never before and God answered Moses' prayer.

Moses took the staff that had turned the water of the Nile into blood, and he struck the rock, and water poured forth; water from the rock. God said pile up some stones, make a monument, big enough that everyone can see it, and call the place Massah and Meribah, “testing and quarreling”, because the people Israel had quarreled and tested the Lord there, saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

And so it became the first public monument marking our forebears failure to do the right thing, to trust in God. And from that time on, that pile of stone, that sculpture of the earth became a place of remembrance marking the faithlessness and failure of God’s people.

That is not a justification for honoring occasions or people who do not point us to the best rather than the worst in us (not that all of us are not a mixture of both).

One thing the removal of confederate statues, of General Lee and Stonewall Jackson, and others cannot do, is hide the sin that was the War Between the States. Some say General Lee could have sat out the war, not taken sides, not chosen as he did. Some say he betrayed the nation to whom he had raised his hand in an oath to preserve, protect, and defend. Some say that because he was such a good tactician and strategist that the war went on much longer than it should have, that the blood of many Confederate soldiers as well as Union are on his hands. He chose what he thought was his duty. Time and history have shown us not just that it was the losing choice, but it was the morally wrong choice. Time makes ancient good uncouth.

The arc of history has thankfully led us away from slavery and the evil of seeing other human beings as something less than human. But all the Confederate statues gone from all the parks and fields and corners of this nation cannot deny that we still suffer from the sin of seeing other human beings as something less than human.

It’s not the statues that are racist, it’s our hearts that are, though the statues symbolize the racism that is around us and within us nonetheless. We should not forget, statues or no, that there is darkness and brokenness and sin that stands in all our hearts.

Time makes ancient good uncouth. And so we try to live our lives humbly before God knowing that we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and trusting that on that Judgment Day when we stand before God, God will be more just and right in judgment of us than we can ever be right and just ourselves – though right and just we should strive to be even now. All that we can ultimately do is throw ourselves on the mercy and forgiveness of the one who holds us in those everlasting arms, and who will finally make right our wrong.

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¹ James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation,” 1845.

² August 20, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544817830/robert-e-lee-s-descendant-on-confederate-statues>

³ David Brooks, “The Robert E. Lee Problem,” NY Times. June 26, 2015.

⁴ Ibid.