

Sermon Series: “Confessions of a Church Pastor”

Sermon: “Pulling Down the Strongholds: What I Believe about Confederate Monuments”

2 Kings 18:5; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

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When we moved to Russia, we discovered it to be a land of memorials and statues. It started with the Communist revolution in 1917, but greatly expanded during Stalin’s era and the Second World War. Some of this was an attempt to replace religion: instead of a statue of Jesus and the children, you now had a statue of Lenin and the children adorning school entrances. Because the deaths during the Second World War were so numerous, even the smallest village erected some kind of monument in the middle of everything, honoring their lost war heroes.

Nancy and I, being there so soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, also meant that we saw national holidays and Communist statuary removed or replaced or reinterpreted. More than 2,000 statues of Lenin came down. I remember reading about how a junk dealer here in Oklahoma purchased some scrap metal from overseas, and along with the traditional stuff out tumbled a fully-intact, larger than life-size statue of Lenin. Apparently some village in Russia was tired of a century-old out-of-date leader taking up all that room in their public park.

Let’s pray. Lord. May the word of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The issue of statues and history is an important one in the United States these days, especially focusing on Confederate monuments and historical and national leaders who may not have a good human rights record. What might be a Christian response to national symbols and monuments, no matter their origin? How are we to respond, for example, to a Christian and activist named Bree Newsome, who in 2015 stood before a Confederate battle flag, flying at the state capital in South Carolina and shouted, “In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today.” Then, she climbed the flagpole and removed the flag as her act of Christian defiance. What are we to make of this? The feelings and attitudes we have about national and historic monuments of any kind are largely inherited as part of our social culture--which means that different cultural and ethnic groups in the US will feel differently about the same symbols and statues because of their heritages. Which feeling is right?

The scripture actually says a lot about monuments and statues, both in religious and political settings. For example, you have this wonderful monument in Joshua chapter Four where twelve stones are taken and arranged so that when persons ask what they mean, the story of God helping the Israelites cross the River Jordan can be told. Then there is the bronze serpent which is lifted up on a pole, and anyone who is bitten by a serpent can look at this symbol, this monument, and be healed.

And then there are the tablets of the Ten Commandments, written by God's own hand. Genesis 31:45 is another powerful story of how a monument establishes a covenant of peace and a boundary between two fighting families, those of Jacob and his father-in-law Laban.

But so many monuments—including most of those I've mentioned—were also contentious. The story of the Jacob and Laban, for example. They make a monument of peace, but won't even call the monument by the same name. The bronze serpent? Later on, maybe because the original history was forgotten, instead of giving thanks to the God who heals, people start to worship the bronze serpent itself. Which isn't too far away from worshipping a golden calf. Moses shatters the two stone tablets of God's covenant with the Israelites when he sees this-- maybe he's afraid the tablets will be worshipped instead of the God who chiseled them.

It seems that we look for meaning IN the monument rather than the story BEHIND the monument. Monuments in scripture become centers of power. Which is probably why the first two commandments chiseled into the stone monuments that Moses takes down the mountain say, and let me paraphrase here, You can't have any other God except me, and, Do not make any carved image of anything, because it's more than likely it will become more important to you than me. Much of the Hebrew Scriptures are the story of struggle over following these first two commandments. Jesus suggests that even the Temple may have even become a place more idolized than Yahweh who was said to reside there. In one place Jesus has to clear out its profiteers. In another he tells a woman that there would come a time when people would worship God not on tops of mountains where statues stood, and not even in the Temple, but in Spirit and in truth.

At the very least, it seems to me that Scripture says two things about monuments: they have a message, and, monuments can become powerful in their own right especially when their story is forgotten or ignored.

What about history and tradition? The scriptures also describe how statues and monuments were used historically by various empires to get others in line with what they believe. During Jesus day, the Roman Empire built statues all over the place, especially of the Emperor, showing him with items that connected the Emperor with divinity. There were also lots of statues to the Roman gods. Both Jews and Christians refused to worship these statues, so that the Jews and Christians were blamed for any bad events or weather that happened in those places. Paul, when he was preaching at Athens, took advantage of Roman belief about a statue to talk about Jesus and the resurrection.

In the Christian church over the centuries there has been an ebb and flow of different views about Christian symbols, statues and art. The Eastern Church, for example, believes that icons are not works of art, but rather spiritual windows into heaven. The Western Church developed significant statuary of biblical figures, and the idea of relics—physical items preserved from the events of Jesus or the lives of the saints—touching one of these could give blessings. The Protestant Reformation saw Roman Catholic statuary and religious art as idolatry, and some went about Europe destroying these graven images. This is why many Protestant churches to this day are fairly simple and plain--they don't want the focus to be taken away from the empty Cross or the preached word.

But how does any of our Christian understanding from scripture and tradition connect with Confederate flags and historical monuments, if at all? This is where we need to use reason to learn and understand more about the monuments, signs and symbols that we raise in our country. Historians and social psychologists can help us gain insight.

First, humans seem to be story-telling animals, and they tell their history in many ways, including public monuments. Public monuments don't fall from the sky: they embody some kind of message, some set of values.

In particular, monuments do three things: they tell a interpreted story of the past, they set a particular hope for the future, and they influence the present. That's pretty powerful! Since these three things are also of great importance to the Christian's understanding of the work of God, it's likely God has something to say about every religious or civic public monument, flag, symbol or sign that we erect.

What might God say about Confederate monuments? These monuments have a complex history (just as the Civil War does), and not all of them were erected for the same reasons. So I can speak only in general terms here. But we do know that the first Confederate monuments were associated with cemeteries. They tell the story of loss, and they share a religious hope for a future reunion. My guess is if that's where all Confederate monuments were erected, there would be little controversy today.

The majority of Confederate monuments, however, came a bit later, peaking around the 1910—this was a time of Southern resurgence, with Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and the constant message that Blacks were unfit to govern through actions such as disenfranchising and poll taxes. These later monuments were placed in the centers of towns. Their common message was that although the war had been lost, the principles behind the reason for fighting must never be lost. This is much different than memorializing the loss of loved ones.

The idea of the Confederacy as a lost cause waiting to be reborn became a common topic of sermons in churches, and Christian symbolism is often found on these statues. These include such inscriptions as, "Our Cause is with God" and "In hope of a joyful resurrection." Confederate heroes were now routinely being called "Christian warriors," and it was common to see parades of veterans, farmers, pastors, congregations, and Ku Klux Klan members all marching together to honor new monuments erected in the South. One such dedication drew 75,000 people. By 1925, a Confederate monument stood in nearly every Southern town.

All of this was intended to change the way the Civil War was remembered: it wasn't a loss but rather a godly sacrificial act. This kind of story gives hope for a future rise of the South once again under God's Providence. The darkest parts of the war, and certainly the issues of slavery and inequality, are intentionally not part of this story.

So, what do I believe as a Christian about all of this?

1. First, I've come to believe that no monument of any kind—be it religious or political--can simply be called historical. All of them have an agenda. A monument is never silent. It is always saying something.
2. Second, a monument of any kind is powerful. It always interprets the past in a certain way and it lays down a direction for a particular future, and it draws us into that interpretation.
3. Third, monuments always say something about God, because Christians believe it is God who helps us understand and interpret history and God is invested in the future of the universe that he created. So, when we encounter a particular monument, we must ask as Christians, Does the understanding of history and people portrayed in this monument reconcile with God's understanding of history and people? What do the religious symbols and phrases on this monument say about the Christian faith as we understand it? What kind of future does this monument want for the world, and does it match the hope of God?
4. Fourth, because a monument of any kind is a public expression trying to influence the greatest number of people possible, the Christian may need to make a public response. I like to use the three-fold public ministry of Jesus as a framework for deciding on a Christian public response. In the gospel of Matthew, we see the three-fold ministry of Jesus as preaching, teaching, and healing.

Let's take healing first. When we remember Jesus in the breaking of the bread, it's just that: we re-member, we put ourselves back together again, only when we embrace how Christ died for our sins through his brokenness. This is where we find our true healing: in brokenness and in new life.

Likewise, for any healing in our nation to take place, the Christian must challenge the interpretations of the past that are depicted in many of these monuments. The Christian must invite persons to remember and embrace the whole story, including the brokenness and sin of slavery, and to seek forgiveness for the fact that we still haven't righted all the wrongs emerging from this chapter of our society. Not one of us is free from the need for forgiveness for our past.

Then there's teaching. Christians have to first ask, Can we add something to the monument to tell the whole story better? For example, often Confederate monuments stand in the town square, next to the place for lynchings. How about adding an additional monument honoring those lynched next to the Confederate statue, to allow persons to see a larger truth? Perhaps some monuments can be moved to a museum or a teaching center, where the symbolism of the monument and its agenda can be unpackaged and explained, so that we don't follow those agendas anymore. We also need curriculum for the churches that discuss how Christian symbols and phrases are often co-opted for cultural and political purposes. How can we teach the truth about history and about God better?

Then there's public preaching. This means being the prophet. Sometimes when a monument says certain things about human beings or the Christian faith or God, a contrary word from God needs to be said. Sometimes that word is "NO!" and that statue needs to come down. Some statues should not have a place in a museum, because the lies they tell are too great, and no

amount of contexting will be helpful to our learning. Monuments can very easily become idols, the scriptures warn us, and idols have power. Most idols just have to be removed.

As she prepared for her mission — scaling the 30-foot flagpole outside the South Carolina Statehouse to bring down the Confederate flag — Bree Newsome reread the biblical story of David and Goliath. I don't even feel like it was my human strength in that moment," said Newsome. "I'm honestly just so humbled."

On June 27, Newsome climbed the flagpole to remove the Confederate battle flag, a symbol that represents for many a war to uphold slavery and, later, a battle to oppose civil rights advances.

Her action came 10 days after the mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, S.C., in which nine participants of a Bible study, including the pastor were killed.

She was charged with defacing a monument, a misdemeanor, according to a statement from the South Carolina Department of Public Safety, and could face a fine of up to \$5,000 and up to three years in prison.

On July 10, the Confederate flag was lowered for good after state legislators signed a bill authorizing its removal.

For Newsome, it was a step too late.

"Why did people have to die for people to realize the state had been promoting hate with this symbol?" she asked.

Newsome grew up hearing her grandmother's story of her black neighbor brutally beaten by Ku Klux Klan members because he was a doctor who treated a white woman. She told of ancestors who came through Charleston's slave market and others who died in lynchings.

Her actions at the South Carolina Statehouse grew out of what she calls her "crisis of faith" following the Emanuel shootings.

"This is like 9/11 to me," Newsome said. "I see people just going about their daily lives. I can't do that. I can't function."

Newsome said it wasn't an easy decision to climb the pole. She was afraid for her life and asked her sister, whom she described as a "prayer warrior," to pray for her.

Her faith helped her overcome her fear. She recounted an argument with a police officer that ordered her down.

"You're doing the wrong thing," she said the officer told her.

At that moment, she said, she remembered her reading of David and Goliath.

And she kept repeating the 27th Psalm: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" as she descended the pole with the flag in hand.

“God is a God of liberation,” Bree says. “I know that he heard my great-great-grandmother in South Carolina when she was praying for her children to be free, and we’re going to keep praying until we’re all free.”