

When Statues Move

A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
Sunday, May 26, 2019

It was the night of August 11, 2017 and I was sitting in a packed church across from the University of Virginia lawn. That night, we heard inspiring sermons, including Cornell West and Traci Blackmon, but after about 2 hours of singing, praying, sermon-making and pledges of solidarity and justice, we were all ready to go home and get some rest, because August 12th was to be a big day. It was the day of the planned Unite the Right Rally in the city of Charlottesville, VA. My husband and I had just moved back to Charlottesville a few days before, and had been invited to attend a clergy demonstration of solidarity and protest against the Unite the Right Rally. We had attended non-violent training earlier in the day and given instructions on how to interact, when not to interact, when to call for help and when to run. The instructions were grave and serious. We were tired.

As we started to get up from our pews, a murmuring had arisen from inside the church – which grew to a buzz – as we were told we were not permitted to leave the building because of the threat that was growing to our safety from outside. “Threat?” What threat? We asked. The rally is tomorrow. Unknown to those of us inside, a group of about 250 white nationalists had gathered for an unannounced and unsanctioned march through the University of Virginia’s lawn. **SLIDE** They marched around the lawn with tiki torches and chanting “White Lives Matter” and “You will not replace us!” and “Jews will not replace us.” Even more chillingly, they chanted the Nazi slogan “Blood and Soil” The organizers of the worship service were worried about releasing 250 anti-Unite the Right into the same area where these 250 young white men were carrying tiki torches at the same time. So we were held inside the building until the tiki torches had marched to the Rotunda. There, they encountered a group of about thirty counter protesters, mostly UVA students, who, ironically, had locked arms around the statue of Thomas Jefferson. A fight broke out – people were pepper sprayed and hit with tiki torches until finally the Virginia State Police broke up the fight.

All this for—what? I know you know the initial reason for the rally – the reason that former UVA grad had planned this rally was to protest the proposed removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee, the confederate general, which stood in what was known as Lee Park. This is a picture that I took from that day – with the Lee statue in the background. In the foreground was a member of a volunteer militia, who came to provide “protection” for - whom? We weren’t sure. But we do know that after the mass murder in Charleston, NC, the nation began to look at the monuments we build, the statues we create, the flags we fly, in a different light. And none of that comes without struggle.

Today is Memorial Day weekend – the official beginning of summer; the day weekend when many people pull out their boats or their beers and grills; but more than the start of summer, Memorial Day has a more honorable purpose – to remember all those persons who died while serving in the United States Military. It’s not just a time to tell our veterans “thank you for your service,” it’s a time to mourn with them, those whose lives were lost in the wars in which we, as a nation, create – respond to – or sanction. It wasn’t officially recognized as a federal holiday until 1971, but its origins go all the way back to the Civil War – which claimed more lives than any conflict in the United States history. There were so many lives lost, it required the establishment of the nations’ first national cemeteries. This morning, I want to both honor those whose lives were lost in all of our nation’s wars. One way we do this is by creating cemeteries, tombstones and monuments to honor our dead. But the larger question for this morning is – whose story gets told and whose legacy is memorialized in stone? And what happens, when those statues move? These are not only important sociological and political questions – they are religious and spiritual ones. Our faith tradition insists that “revelation is not sealed” which means we – as a religious and spiritual people – must keep our minds open to new insights, new truths and not become like a statue of stone or wood, immobile, fixed for all time. We discard out-worn beliefs

when we discover they no longer fit us. At the same time, all of us can fall prey to self-deception. All of us can unwittingly buy-into a false narrative. All of us can argue for the wrong God. And that's what I saw in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 11 and 12, 2017.

The statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Emancipation Park is impressive. 26 feet high, 12 feet long, 8 feet wide, Lee sits aside a striding horse. The horse is a thing of beauty; neck arched, tail swaying as if caught by a wind. Lee's hat is held in his hand, his eyes downcast, his demeanor, somber. He looks defeated – some might even say penitent if you can ascribe an emotion to a statue. This statue is only one of the many statues erected some 50 years after the Civil War ended – totems of a campaign to historically reimagine the meaning of the Civil War. In an article entitled “Monuments to a Life” Pete Candler writes: “The years from 1890 to 1920 marked the high point of this campaign, led by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Sons of Confederate Veterans and other groups which today protest heritage violations” of their ongoing program of public commemoration....And they have not lost: Confederate revisionism, in the soft form of preservationism, is now the province of local, state and even federal governments.”¹

We need to understand the term “lost cause” In the podcast “Monumental Lies” they describe Lost Cause in this way “Confederates who lost the war devised this idea of the lost cause. It's a whole false interpretation of history designed to justify their defeat, to absolve themselves of any guilt for starting the way and to vindicate their pre-war way of life...the larger goal of these once powerful men was to end the process that was reordering Southern society – reconstruction. They wanted to redeem their status, their power and their control over Black lives and labor.” And so, the myth making began and for 150 years, monuments to Civil War “heroes” were erected; Stonewall Jackson, Robert E Lee, and of other leaders as well. Who can forget the Baltimore statue to Roger B. Taney, the Supreme Court Justice who wrote the Dred Scott decision which upheld slavery?

The Unite the Right Rally came to Charlottesville not just to protest the proposed removal of the statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. Their chants “you will not erase us” was a 21st century version of the Lost Cause; of a time when white men of prestige had the power to control the story of what was good, and right and true. They created monuments to self-deception and have treated those monuments as sacred parts of a national landscape.²

On August 12, about 50 members of the clergy, my husband and I stood in a single line in front of the park which housed the statue of Robert E. Lee. Because much of our time was just standing there, some of us started talking to the militia men who were also standing with us, in full regalia. “Where are you from?” we asked. “What brought you here?” One man's answer was predictable, but chilling – “I am here to literally protect history from being erased.” For him, the history that he feared being erased – the one that he wanted to keep alive – was a myth built on a lie – a lie that the Civil War was not about slavery, but about states rights and succession. It reminded me of the encounter I heard between the reporters from the podcast Reveal which I've been encouraging you all to listen to in advance of this sermon. The conversation was between Seth Freed, reporter for reveal and Donna Barnes, the volunteer docent of the home of Jefferson Davis in Biloxi, Mississippi. Seth asks her “what do you tell the tourists about slavery?” She says “I want to tell them the honest truth about it, that slavery was good and bad. It was good for the people that didn't know how to take care of themselves, and they needed a job. You had good slave owners like Jefferson Davis who took care of his slaves and treated them like family. He loved them.” Reporters Freed and Palmer then say “There were not family. They were property. Jefferson Davis, who led a would be nation created to defend slavery, owned dozens of people, black people. This place, the historical Beauvoir Estate, was built with enslaved labor.

So what do you do with a lie? You have to expose it. But how do you do that? You have to be dedicated to a kind of fearless and rigorous honesty

¹ The Christian Century, Monuments to a Lie” pg. 34; May 22, 2019.

² Christian Century, pg. 32, Monuments to a Lie.

– the same kind of honesty we must apply to our religious and spiritual lives. What has been completely missing in the 150 year buildup of monuments have been the voices of people of color – who, if they were consulted, would have objected to the spending of millions of tax payer dollars to create, maintain and secure Confederate monuments and cemeteries. One of the men I spoke to that day said “well, if they (presumably people of color) want a monument, let them raise the money and put up their own monument. I got no objection to that. Just don’t take down a piece of my history.” Even as I tried to explain the decades of money spent on maintain this lie, it was clear that nothing I could say would change his mind. Even as I tried to get him to understand that it wasn’t just HIS history here – there was a larger history not being told – and the one that was being celebrated was inherently racist – it was clear that nothing I said was going to penetrate his opinion. For him, the Lee Statue represented all that was right with the South and wrong with the world.

The problem is that the statues represent a kind of fake history. In a way, I don’t blame these Lost Cause Defenders because if we’re honest, we all can be prone to a re-imagination of history. Maybe we have constructed a narrative about our own lives which, at some point we realize does not serve us well. Maybe we have told ourselves our parents were wonderful, only to face up to the realities of their abusiveness or neglect or alcoholism. Maybe we’ve created a story in our minds about how much better the old days were than these days; how people were nicer or smarter or less confrontational. Pete Candler, author of the article I cited earlier “Monuments to a Lie,” asks this: “What if history is not at all the way we prefer to remember it? Could it that monuments – not just public ones but also those our own personal histories are made of – are tokens of a tacit agreement to forget certain difficult truths? Directed both generally at an inveterate human skill for self-deception and specifically at the mythology of the Lost Cause, the question is: what if you are wrong about what it is you think you were fighting for?”

This is why Memorial Day is not “Happy” as advertisers would like to suggest. Memorial Day is actually a day of mourning – not only for those

who were truly lost in armed conflict, but for the ongoing failure of our ability to live in peace. That’s what I really mourn – our human failure to settle differences and conflicts without having to go to war. I know it sounds pollyanish to imagine a world in peace – impossible to imagine perhaps – but it’s a vision I stubbornly insist upon, even when it means having to face difficult truths. And what are those difficult truths?

For those who marched in Charlottesville shouting “You will not replace us,” the truth is not that this country will be replacing white men anytime soon. The difficult truth for them to realize is that finally in some places - the lives and stories of people of color are being named and heard and taken seriously. This is not a displacement of white people; but a decentering of them. The difficult truth for those of us who would be the ones protesting the Unite the Right rally; those white people among us who maybe marched in the 60’s, who demonstrated in the 70’s, who took up racial justice in the 80’s or beyond – the difficult truth is that we, as people who believe ourselves to be white – have got much to learn. Revelation is not sealed; nor is our understanding of the realities of racism and white supremacy.

Back in the 1990’s, Unitarian Universalism partnered with an organization that offered anti-racist training. It was called “CrossRoads” and it started with one key idea: If you were white, you are a racist.” Racism is different than race bias of course. Race bias is a personal hatred of a person of another race. Race-ism as people who exercise privilege and have the power to act on that privilege. What some Unitarian Universalists grappled with was the fact that despite their good intentions; despite our hard work, despite all of our book learning and marches and education, we would still be called a racist. What? I could hear some sputter. I am NOT a white supremacist like those who marched in Charlottesville. I am NOT chanting Blood and Soil. I am NOT a racist.

It took me a long time to be able to acknowledge the truth of that training, because I, like so many others, resisted it. I resisted saying “yup, I am a racist.” Because just like white supremacy has little to do with KKK hoods and sheets; to say calls oneself a racist doesn’t mean

you're a nazi skinhead. It means that as a white person, you have a certain exercise privilege and have the power to act on that privilege. It means that you simply acknowledge the fact that racism is a virus to which all of us are exposed, but it is in the DNA of white people. Hopefully, we spend the rest of our lives trying to combat the ways in which that virus manifests itself in our daily lives and affects the lives of people of color.

So, if someone charges me with being a racist, I say "yes, unfortunately I am." Not because I want to be. Not because I actively cultivate that virus. I can say this because I believe constantly defending oneself against that reality is a waste of time and energy. I can say that because as a white person living in this country, it's impossible not to be. The layers of duplicity, lies, and myths that we all have been born into are like the statues of the Confederacy – they look noble unless you have the eyes with which to see them clearly and plainly for what they are. They are symbols of white supremacy. And we should look upon them not with adulation, but with horror. And then, we take them down, one statue at a time.

In May 2017, the city of New Orleans removed its statue of General Robert E. Lee from Lee Circle in New Orleans. This was a 16 foot bronze figure on a 60 foot pedestal in the center of Lee Circle. Mayor Mitch Landrieu ordered the statues removal but could not find a contractor willing to do the job. The contractors who signed up for the removal received multiple death threats and one had his car firebombed. Landrieu writes: "Can you imagine, in the second decade of the 21st century, tactics as old as burning crosses or social exclusion, just dressed up a little bit, were being used to stop what was now an official act authorized

by the government in legislative, judicial and executive branches. This is very definition of institutionalized racism. You may have the law on your side, but if someone controls the money, the machines or the hardware you need to make your new law work, you are screwed. This is exactly what has happened to African Americans over the last three centuries."³

And so, the statues were removed and moved to an undisclosed location. Some have suggested that they be stored in a massive museum that tells the whole story – not a nostalgic story but the other sides of the story; of what these statues have come to mean. You see, a statue is not a living thing – but the stories we tell about the past – and about ourselves – is alive. It moves. It changes. Ten years ago, we weren't talking about white supremacy in Unitarian Universalism – now we are. Five years ago the conversation about removing symbols and monuments of the Confederacy was raised and rejected; now we are looking at monuments in a different way. When we put anyone on a pedestal, whether a war hero, a religious or political leader, or whomever - we then turn them into an idol – something frozen in time – and the complexities of their lives and their story becomes nothing more than stone or concrete.

Statues are supposed to be fixed forever in time; that's part of their appeal. But they're also speaking to us – are we listening? But I say – as religiously liberal people; we have to examine and challenge every statue, every monument, every idol of our own making - which includes the lies and deceptions we tell ourselves. We must invite them to step off their pedestal and sit down among us. When our statues move – so must we – and may it be so!

³ Landrieu, Mitch. In the Shadow of Statues: A White Southerner confronts History. Prologue