

When Monuments Fall ©

A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

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All Souls Church Unitarian, DC

They ARE coming down, one by one, by one. Not falling of their own accord, but pushed, pummeled, hacked, toppled, shoved, or removed by City after years of debate. They are coming down in Birmingham, Bentonville and Baltimore, in Nashville and New Orleans; in Mobile and Montgomery; in more than 106 statues or markers of the Confederacy were removed in 2020 alone

But one--one remained until June 23, 2020, one of the largest statues that stood on a 115 foot perch in the center of Marion Square, where it had lived since the Ladies Monument Association of Charleston, South Carolina voted to “aid in the erection in or near the city of Charleston, a monument sacred to the memory of John C. Calhoun.”

All Souls knows something about former Vice President of the United States of America John C. Calhoun, because he is one of our ancestors. The them for the month of November is ancestors and last week, I looked at two of All Souls more prominent ancestors: Revs. A. Powell Davies and David Eaton. This past Thursday, we celebrated the official date for All Souls charter, on November 11th, 1821. So this morning, I want to launch off into a different direction beginning with two of our more notable ancestors – that of John Quincy Adams, 6th President of the United States and staunch abolitionist and John C. Calhoun, Vice-President to John Quincy Adams , segregationist and slave-holder. I’d like to you imagine with me, sitting together not in this building but in the first one, on 6th and D streets. Why were these two men, so different in political affiliations, attracted to Unitarianism? How can you have an abolitionist and a supporter of slavery both believe in the ideals, promises and possibilities of Unitarianism? .

Why John Quincy Adams was a founder of All Souls is relatively easy to understand. As a boy, he attended the First Parish Church in Quincy, MA with his father, John Adams. Once arriving in Washington, he became one of the 27 founding members of the First Unitarian Church of Washington. Adams was a dedicated seeker of

religious truth, and he cherished the intellectual freedom that accompanied Unitarianism. But, for as much as we may admire Adams anti-slavery viewpoints, he was not a church member you would enjoy talking to over coffee hour. He was often hypercritical, acerbic and argumentative. He was the kind of member who, when heading for the microphone at Annual meetings would make you inwardly groan, knowing that his arguments, while brilliant, would also be filled with blistering and exhausting critique.

We embrace John Quincy Adams as our ancestor, but may wonder, how on earth then, did John C. Calhoun become attracted to Unitarianism? Calhoun was raised and married a Calvinist, but there were early indications of Calhoun’s rejection of this rigid faith. He was cerebral, intellectual and enjoyed engaging in deep conversations, including with women, whom he considered his intellectual equals. In 1820, along with John Quincy Adams, Calhoun contributed money for the construction of the Washington’s First Unitarian Church. Whether Calhoun attended regularly, or if at all, is unknown, because a donation to help build the church is not the same thing as being a member. But, there is plenty of evidence to believe that Calhoun took an interest in Unitarianism. A recent biography entitled, Calhoun: American Heretic, writes this: “Calhoun’s gravitation toward Unitarianism seems to have been the natural result of his temperament, his devotion to reason and his embrace of progress. “Unitarianism, it was said, embraced the unity of God, the brotherhood of man and the neighborhood of Boston...it was a rational and optimistic faith that appealed to Americans, including Calhoun, who believed they were living in a unique epoch of human history marked by freedom, toleration and progress of all areas of human understanding.”¹ Calhoun was so convinced of the efficacy of Unitarianism that he remarked that “Unitarianism was the true faith and must ultimately prevail over the world. It will be the religion of the country, sir, in fifty years,”

indicating that he was no better prophet than Thomas Jefferson.²

Later, as we know, John Quincy Adams became the 6th President of the United States, choosing John C. Calhoun to be his Vice President. The political differences between these two men could not be more evident. Imagine, if you will, Nancy Pelosi being President and choosing hmm. Say, Lindsay Graham to be her Vice President. Unthinkable! Yet here they were, both attending what would later become All Souls Church Unitarian, drawn to Unitarian's commitment to rational thinking in religion, to our democratic processes, and to what historian Earl Morse Wilbur would later name the three theological pillars of Unitarianism – freedom, reason and tolerance.

In their time, both Adams and Calhoun would have been considered “great men.” Great is a concept that existed long before, but a phrase that was coined in the 19th century idea which is this “history can be largely explained by the impact of great men, who due to their natural attributes, such as superior intellect, heroic courage, extraordinary leadership abilities and inspiration have had a decisive historical effect.”³ Emerson has declared that it is “natural to believe in great men. Whether this is a fact, or not, we do believe in them and worship them . . . We do this not because he is essentially different from us, but because of his identity with us. He is our best representative and reflects, on a colossal scale, the scale to which we would aspire, our highest aims, objects, powers and possibilities.”

But, as fellow Unitarian and author Kerry Folan writes, John Quincy Adams actually disagreed. In 1831, John Quincy Adams wrote in his journal: “Democracy has no monuments; it strikes no medals; it bears the head of no man upon a coin; it's very essence is iconoclastic. This is the reason why Congress have never been able to erect a monument to Washington.” In the founding decades of the United States, the monarchical concept of commemoration was dismissed as obsolete. Monuments built in honor of great men were considered relics of the Old World. In the New World, the true memory of democracy was supposed to live in the hearts of the people.”

It states the obvious to say that this worship of Great Men is applied almost exclusively to White Men. And furthermore, the vast majority of monuments, erected between 1890 and the 1950's served another, more sinister purpose. They were deliberately placed in city squares and town centers to send a message “we may have lost the Civil War, but we are still in power. We glorify and support the cause of the Civil War – the maintenance of white supremacy.”

When I moved back to Charlottesville, VA in August 2017, my husband, who had lived here previously, gave me the historical tour of Charlottesville. One of the first places we visited was what was then called Lee Park. And of course in the center of that park was a statue of Robert E. Lee, sitting atop a horse in mid stride, Lee's presence is upright and commanding; the plinth on which it stands is elegant and stately. And it was on August 12, 2017, that my husband and I stood along the perimeters of that same park, along with about 60 other clergy, with the intention to create a barrier with our bodies to the park when the United the Right attenders came marching into our town, with their polo shirts and khaki pants; their tiki torches and their chants, shouting ‘You will not replace us...and Jews will not replace us. But our numbers were not great enough to surround the park, so we silent and prayerful witness to stand against the Unite the Righters and in protest to the looming presence of General Robert E. Lee.

Fast forward to the aftermath of the Unite the Right rally. After protester Heather Heyer was killed by a deranged Unite the Right member, it seemed fitting and appropriate to no longer see the reminder of a symbol that unified hate. It was shrouded in black tarp, which looked like a giant garbage bag covering up the statue. Four years later, on July 10, 2021, the statues of both Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson were finally removed. The plinth remains empty as a placeholder – a question mark –and as a silent testament to all of those persons who whose bravery, courage, valor, contributions continue to not be recognized.

These symbols of white supremacy in the form of Confederate monuments and markers are being pulled down, toppled over, throw into the river, defaced, splashed with tomato juice, but the

questions remains; What to do with the empty space that they used to occupy?

One teacher in City Neighbors Charter School in Baltimore proposed an answer. The teacher, Mr. Toops, wanted his class to understand why certain monuments were being removed. So, he created a unit called “Who Deserves a Monument” and it was so good, it turned into a curriculum for 6th grade. When some sixth graders were asked to consider why some people got monuments in the past, one student raised her hand with a theory: “In history, white people liked to put up white people monuments.” So, their teacher challenged them to find other people in history that could take the place of those confederate monuments that were taken down. They came up with the names of famous people, like Muhammad Ali and Jada Pinkett Smith, but through the course of their study, they went back into history to talk about unsung heroes – like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a powerful poet whose words awakened a nation to the inhumanity of slavery; Or the story of Victorine Adams in the 1930’s, a housewife who challenged the narrative that blacks could not participate in politics, one doorbell, one meeting at a time; Irene Morgan, who predated Rosa Parks in taking a stand against segregation, or the amazing story of William Parker, born 1821-1891. To tell William Parker’s story would require an entire sermon in itself, but let me just say, when you do read about William Parker, you will be amazed and astonished as to why you never heard of him in our history books.

William Parker was born a slave in Anne Arundel County Maryland, who escaped slavery and then became abolitionist and anti-slavery activist. He was instrumental in what became known as the Christiana riot of 1851, when slave hunters attempted to return a slave under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. He was more fierce, radical and had more to lose than his white contemporary John Brown. He and his wife Eliza bore 10 children and lived in Canada until Parker went back to Christina for a reunion of sorts, with those who defended the right to be free. If anyone should get a monument shouldn’t it be someone like William Parker – an unsung hero for freedom?

Well, this is where the story takes an odd turn. Parker left his abolitionist wife, Eliza to

attend a reunion in Christiana, and it was there, he fell in love with another man’s wife. They moved to Kenton, Ohio, living out the rest of their days in married bliss, *and never again had contact with his wife Eliza or their children*. So, for all of Parker’s courage and bravery, the truth is that he also he abandoned his wife and children, never communicating with them his whereabouts or that he had taken a new wife and formed a new life in Ohio.

So, imagine if you are one of Eliza and William Parker’s descendents, and you come upon a monument to your ancestor in Christiana, Pennsylvania. As you gaze upon this monument, you can honor William Parker’s bravery, persistence and resistance to white supremacy. But you also know that your other ancestor – Eliza Parker and her children likely grieved the husband that didn’t realize had left her and her children. How would you feel about the monument to William Parker then?

Here is the problems with monuments to human beings. John Quincy Adams may have been on the right side of history with is abolitionist beliefs, but the stories told about him personally were that he was often caustic and could be cruel in his denunciations. John C. Calhoun was on the wrong side of history, yet his love of Unitarian beliefs, and his insistence on freedom, reason and tolerance in religion would have been widely accepted by us today. Here’s the problem with creating a hagiographic history of human beings; we are all neither sinners nor saints; we are capable of extraordinary courage and astonishing cruelty. The problem with monuments and markers, or even naming rooms or buildings after people is that we don’t know what to do with them after we find out the whole truth.

The removal of monuments from the public sphere is but one symptom of a larger reality – that we as human beings are trying to figure out how on earth can we accept and embrace the good and the bad? How can we acknowledge that our histories contain multitudes; the alcoholic and the artist; the statesman and the enslaver, the philosopher and the philanderer? This is a spiritual challenge – not just for who gets a monument, but a deeper, more challenging question. How do I look upon you and know that you are capable of doing me great harm

and great good all within one lifespan? How on earth are we to bear it?

This is where I keep returning to this one, tiny line from the Gospel of Mark. The preface to the reading you heard is that a young lawyer, all primed and ready to have a debate with Jesus begins his question with “Good Teacher...”. And before he has a chance to say anything else, Jesus interrupts him and says “why do you call me good? No one but God is good.” In other words, Jesus himself refuses to take on the mantle of saint, though the church has pre-empted his wishes and made him to be the biggest saint of all. I suspect that Jesus knew a spiritual truth – none of us – not even him – are all good or, for that matter, all bad.

It’s true in for people and it’s true for our institutions. The church is no exception. Ministers are held to a high standard because of the power they are given when they accept the call to be a congregation’s spiritual leader. So, It’s a devastating blow to learn, in addition to your minister being present for your child’s dedication and your mother’s death, offering sermons that stir and inspire, that that same minister may have used his power to seduce women in the congregation, or who’s alcoholism affected his ability to be fully present to and with the congregation. It’s hard to understand that a beloved coach who inspires the winning team can be cruel and abusive to the very same players that she professes to love and support. It’ heart-breaking to realize that a teacher whom your child has adored was arrested for addiction to child pornography. How do we hold these dichotomies together?

When monuments fall, what replaces them? When people fail to live up to the one-sided history we tell about them, what we do with them? Hate the sin, love the sinner? What if the sin is really egregious? Can we separate the sin from the sinner? Yet, our Universalist faith teaches us, as Bryan Stevenson reminds us, “each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done”

Let’s go back to John Quincy Adams for a moment. “Monuments built in honor of great men were considered relics of the Old World. In the New World, the true memory of democracy was supposed to live in the hearts of the people.” That would argue that we have no public monuments to people. Instead, I suggest we move away from the

lionization of human beings through public monuments. Instead, we commemorate events and ideas; and if we must acknowledge a person, we can honor them through art. Because monuments are a lot of things, but they are not art. Again, quoting an article by Kerry Folan, “paraphrasing James Baldwin: “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.” When monuments become symbols, they become the answers that obscure the questions.”

Not too far from the park where Robert E. Lee used to stand is now a Memorial to the Enslaved Laborers; of the 4,000 women and men whose hands literally built the University of Virginia. These were women and men, some named, many unnamed. There are some 4,000 names in the monument, represented by letters or gashes if the names of those persons were not known. But one woman’s image, who was formerly enslaved by a professor is subtly carved into the exterior wall of the memorial. Her name was Isabella Gibbons, and after she was emancipated, she became a teacher. You can’t see her face most of the time, except when the sun and shadows play over the memorial, sometimes you can see her eyes emerging as the sun moves overhead. It’s almost as if I can hear her reciting Tretheweys poem to us, “Here, it is only the history of a word, *obelisk*, that points us toward what’s not there; all of it palimpsest, each mute object repeating a single refrain: *Remember this.*”