



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Monuments

Ps. 127:1-2 & Joshua 4:1-9

A sermon by William M. Klein

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¹ When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua:
² "Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³ and command them, 'Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests' feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.'" ⁴ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵ Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever." ⁸ The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. ⁹ (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.) (Joshua 4:1-9 NRSV)

¹ Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. ² It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved. (Ps. 127:1 NRSV)

1

It is clear enough that at this point in time monuments are a flash-point. Emotions are high. Tempers are flaring. Anxiety, frustration, uncertainty, anger have settled like a pal over neighborhoods and cities across this country. Neighbors are yelling across the fence at one another. People are posting hateful things on Facebook they would never say to a person's face. We seem to have reached a point where anything said or done sets people up for being misunderstood and misrepresented and ridiculed.

Why are these monuments such a flash-point? Well, put very simply, there is nothing simple about monuments. Every monument stands for something which evokes emotions and feelings...very mixed emotions and feelings.

Just like you, I have an opinion about all of this...and I knew I was running a risk even bringing up the subject. But my point this morning is not to persuade you one way or other. My point is to have you do what it is important that we do as church - that is, think together about what we are up against. The church can and should speak in a way that can provide people with some clarity and sanity. That said, I say this well aware we seem to be in a no-win climate where you are damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't.

Let me begin in the shallow end...by asking if you have noticed the stacks of stones along the roadways? I don't know who has gone to the trouble to set these stones one on the other...or why they did it.

In Scotland you see these things fairly often. They call them **cairns** - a Gaelic word that means a "stack of stones." They are monuments of sorts that mark trails or burial spots or special religious sites or reminders of any number of occurrences.

There is a cairn on one of my favorite spots in the world...the highest point on the Island of Iona in Scotland - on what is called Dùn I.¹ At its base this cairn must be ten feet in diameter and, last time I saw it, stands about seven feet high.

When you visit the Abbey on Iona it is common to take a pilgrimage on Wednesdays around the 3x1 mile island. At Columba Bay the leader of the pilgrimage encourages everyone to select a stone to take with them to Dùn I.² This stone is to represent some burden you want to lay down. You had better select a small stone because the hike back across the island from the South end then up Dùn I is pretty taxing. When everyone has made the journey and is assembled atop of the wee hill, the group is led in a brief liturgy. Then, upon the cairn, you place the stone you have carried from Columba Bay that represents some burden you no longer needed to carry back home with you.

As far as monuments go, the cairn on Dùn I on the Isle of Iona has and probably will continue to be a safe symbol for good. Can the same be said for all monuments?

In our reading from the Hebrew book of Joshua we find that Joshua had his twelve commanders take twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan River and erect a cairn with them at a campsite west of the river. After they had built this monument Joshua took twelve other stones and made a second cairn in the middle of the river near Jericho.

What was this all about? It was about remembering...remembering that God had parted the Jordan River so the people of Israel could pass through. Later in chapter 4 we read, "When your children ask their parents in time to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let them know, 'Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so you may fear the Lord your God forever."³

Both cairns were erected to help the people remember and give thanks to their mighty and fearful God. And both cairns were erected to help them remember something they were about to do...capture and utterly destroy Jericho and everyone who lived in Jericho.⁴

Hum. The cairn Joshua built has a different quality and character than the one on Dùn I, doesn't it? Can you pinpoint the difference?

The more we dig into the story of Israel entering the Promised Land the more we realize we are dealing with a monument enshrouded by at least a two-layered memory. The cairn reminded the people of Israel how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, provided for them through their wilderness journey, and then led them into the land he promised. In order for the Hebrew people to occupy this new land, though, indigenous

peoples had to die. For years to come when the people of Israel stumbled upon the cairn in the middle of the Jordan River they may have had pleasant memories associated with God's love and care. The people whose land the Israelites took would certainly look upon that same pile of stones differently...very differently!

That's the thing with monuments. Depends a great deal upon whose looking at them.

4

I have to say that I grew up not giving much thought to statues of Confederate Generals. It always seemed a little odd to me...but I didn't give them much thought. They just were. Then again, I'm white.

Now that many of those statues honoring those Confederate war heroes are coming down across the South, I've had to spend some time giving the phenomena of monuments some thought. I have realized some of the men memorialized by these statues were not very good people. Some, though, were very fine men - people like Lee and Jackson. Their stories are worthy of being taught and are worth knowing.

But as fine as both men were, when some people look upon these statues this is what they see: They see monuments erected by white southerners as an expression of their collective values—chief among them being a commitment to white supremacy that secessionists were willing to die for.⁵

You may take issue with that conclusion. You may insist their conclusion is mistaken. You may say that is not at all what you think when you see a Confederate General sitting astride his trusty steed. But it is a fact that for most black people and for many white people, this is what these monuments represent. Every time they see these statues the implicit message is this: the Confederacy may have failed but white supremacy did not.

That's the thing with monuments. Depends a great deal upon whose looking at them.

Back in May, the mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, a white man, spoke about why he was ordering a statue of Robert E. Lee to be removed. He acknowledged that Lee had so many fine and noble qualities...that basically he was a good and honorable man. He then asked his fellow citizens to look at the monument through the eyes of a black child:

Can you look into that young girl's eyes and convince her that Robert E. Lee is there to encourage her? Do you think she will feel inspired and hopeful by that story? Do these monuments help her see a future with limitless potential? Have you ever thought that if her potential is limited, yours and mine are, too?⁶

In his 1st letter to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul wrote about troubles in the church around food. Some people believed it was sinful to eat meat that had been offered to idols. Paul had no trouble eating meat offered to idols because he knew idols didn't and don't really exist - that there was no God but God. But because he knew there were some members of the church who were terribly offended by followers of Jesus eating meat offered to idols, Paul was willing to never eat meat so he would not be the cause of even one of them to fall.⁷

3

Can Paul's advice and example be applied to the way we deal with monuments? Since it seems we as a people feel as though we must erect monuments...what if, as we planned what monuments to erect, we really took time to consider from as many angles as possible what message such a monument would give to all concerned?

And what if as we planned what monuments to erect we had in mind the message we find in Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. There Jesus talks about the Son of Man coming to separate the sheep from the goats. He says to the sheep - "Come...for I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcome me, naked and you gave me clothing, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me." And the sheep answered, "When did we do all of this?" And Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me."

Then turning to the goats Jesus condemned them because they did not take time to even notice the needs of those people around them. Jesus said that by ignoring the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and those in prison, they ignored Jesus himself. Jesus condemned them for not noticing and for not acting with their best interest at heart.⁸

As followers of the man who gave special preference to the poor and downtrodden, we could do a better job of thinking through who and what we choose to memorialize.

5

Because this is Rat Sunday and I knew there would be a fair number of young women and men who eight days ago entered the strange new world of the VMI Rat line...I wanted to be among the first persons to introduce you to a VMI graduate named Jonathan M. Daniels, valedictorian of the Class of 1961.

After finishing VMI he briefly studied English literature at Harvard. But he soon realized he was being called to become a minister. So he enrolled at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was there that he became actively involved in the Civil Rights movement...specifically efforts to register black people to vote.

In August 1965, after being released from a short stay in the county jail for participating in a voter rights demonstration, Daniels and a Roman Catholic priest, accompanied two black teenagers, Joyce Bailey and Ruby Sales, to a store to buy a soda. They were met on the steps by Tom Coleman, a construction worker, and part-time deputy sheriff, who was carrying a shotgun. When Coleman aimed his gun at sixteen year old Ruby Sales and fired, Daniels pushed her to the ground in order to protect her, saving her life. The shotgun blast killed Daniels instantly. The Catholic priest was seriously wounded. When Martin Luther King heard of the tragedy, he said, "One of the most heroic Christian deeds of which I have heard in my entire ministry was performed by Jonathan Daniels."

In the years since his death, Daniels' selfless act has been recognized in many ways. Two books have been written about his life, and a documentary was produced in 1999. The Episcopal Church added the date of his death to its Calendar of Lesser Feasts and Fasts, and in England's Canterbury Cathedral, Daniels name is among the fifteen honored in the Chapel of Martyrs.

The VMI Board of Visitors voted in 1997 to establish the Jonathan M. Daniels '61 Humanitarian Award. The award emphasizes the virtue of humanitarian public service

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and recognizes individuals who have made significant personal sacrifices to protect or improve the lives of others. The inaugural presentation was made to President Jimmy Carter in 2001. Ambassador Andrew Young was presented the award in 2006...and Rep. John Lewis was presented the award in 2015. In addition, one of only four named archways in the VMI Barracks is dedicated to Daniels, as is a memorial courtyard.⁹

If VMI is thinking about erecting another statue on post, I would commend one to Jonathan Daniels. His legacy is the sort of legacy that should be on display for all to see. If you Rats are looking for a hero, you do not need to look any farther than Jonathan M. Daniels, Class of 61.

5

Will we ever reach a point where we are mature enough to understand the implications of the monuments we attempt to leave behind.¹⁰ I'll go out on a limb and say, "maybe." The psalmist gives us perhaps the best advice we can find. The psalmist wrote, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

Maybe the prayer before us as we deal with this thorny issue of what to do with monuments is this: "O God, grant us enough maturity and sufficient faith to live every day mindful that unless you build the houses, the legacies, the monuments we build...we labor in vain." Earnestly, consistently, religiously praying that sort of prayer ought to inject a fair amount of perspective and humility into the monuments we choose to leave behind.



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Endnotes:



¹ A picture of the cairn on Dùn I on the Isle of Iona in Scotland. Dùn I stands some 101 meters (333 ft) above sea level.

² Unfortunately the pilgrimage no longer travels to Dùn I because it is private property and the owner does not wish to allow groups. Individuals, though, can still climb the hill - just not as part of a weekly pilgrimage.

³ See Joshua 4:21-24.

⁴ See Joshua 6. The only person spared was Rahab who had helped the spies Joshua had sent earlier to spy out Jericho.

⁵ Levin, Kevin M. 2017. "Why I Changed My Mind About Confederate Monuments," in *The Atlantic*, August 19 issue. www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/why-i-changed-my-mind-about-confederate-monuments/537396/

⁶ Levin.

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 8, particularly vs. 13.

⁸ See Matthew 25:31-46.

⁹ See <http://www.vmi.edu/archives/genealogy-biography-alumni/featured-historical-biographies/jonathan-daniels-civil-rights-hero/>

¹⁰ Whyte, David. 2015. Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words. Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 193.