

“What’s In a Stone?”

Acts 17:22-31

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Mt. Calvary and St. Paul’s

May 28, 2017

Here is a reminder of some of the known, and lesser known facts about Memorial Day, courtesy of USAToday:

- Originally called Decoration Day, this national holiday sprang up somewhat simultaneously throughout the States in the wake of the Civil War. The town of Waterloo, New York, “won” the title to be designated the birthplace. Their first celebration was on May 5, 1866.
- Memorial Day was celebrated on May 30 until 1971 when an Act of Congress established the holiday as the last Monday in May and a federal holiday.
- Memorial Day (then Decoration Day) originally honored military personal who died in the Civil War. The number of those who died in that conflict was roughly 620,000 Americans. Compare that number with the roughly 644,000 Americans who have died in all other conflicts. The Union lost almost 365,000 and the Confederacy lost almost 260,000. More than half of the deaths occurred because of disease.

- There are still states that commemorate the holiday by its old name and at a different date: Mississippi (Confederate Memorial Day) – last Monday of April; Alabama the fourth Monday of April; Georgia, April 26; North and South Carolina, May 10; Louisiana, June 10 – a date that Tennessee calls Confederate Decoration Day. Texas celebrates Confederate Heroes Day on Jan 19 and some parts of Virginia call the last Monday in May Confederate Memorial Day.
- Although not part of the USA Today article, since 1988 Rolling Thunder has been bringing their motorcycle tribute to Washington DC on Memorial Day to bring awareness to Prisoners of War and those soldiers who have been classified as Missing in Action and whose bodies have not been recovered.

Even from that list of trivia we can see the emotional investment that is tied to this particular holiday. This year in particular we find this emotion also connected to some very raw emotions, particularly around monuments to anyone in the Confederacy. To paraphrase Paul in his encounter with the people of Athens:

*Then Paul, or someone of his caliber, stood at the most prominent place in these United States, possibly beside the Reflecting Pool within sight of Arlington National Cemetery, the Korean War Memorial, the World War I Pavilion, the World War II monument; the Wall honoring the Vietnam dead, the memorial to Martin Luther King Jr, and the new African-American Museum, and said: "Americans, I see how extremely patriotic you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship....."*

We are a monumental town in a country of monuments. We feel a deep-seated need to inscribe our history in stone and elevate it to great heights. We feel a deep-seated need to name public streets, public facilities and public schools after people and infuse that naming as sacrosanct (at least until a commercial advertising offer comes along and that street, airport or school becomes an advertising slogan). We pay little attention to the names that are not so honored until decades or centuries after the fact and then we invest mightily in making those changes. Sometimes they don't work out so well (the Susan B. Anthony silver dollar wasn't a big winner).

Now our communities, from New Orleans to Memphis to Charlottesville to Norfolk to Alexandria are caught up the very public debate about stone. The stone carries different faces, different shapes, but the stone is the center of yet another highly divisive thread confronting us in our day and time. Lines are being drawn – words are escalating – hate signs are appearing – values are being challenged.

Maybe in the future our monuments will be digitalized so that we can hit the delete button if we don't want to see them. Maybe in the future we can figure out how and where to place public works so that they will not haunt future generations. Maybe. But I doubt it.

Those pieces of stone, whether the very simple square block of marble identifying a state's unknown soldiers in a national cemetery, or an elaborate memorial of a prominent person hoisted on a pedestal, are windows to a particularity. The essence of that view will change over time – and so the story should rightfully expand. We have too long glorified an incident or a person without contextualizing either.

Monuments to the Confederacy do include in that story the original sin of the signers of our Constitution designating African-Americans slaves as 3/5 of a person in order to gain

more voting leverage. They do include the evil of slavery practiced in both the north and for a longer time in the south where we bought and sold one another and then abused each other. Some of the monuments were built to glorify a time long past and probably not as idyllic as "Gone With the Wind" would have us believe.

Monuments to the Union, including the sacred ground of Arlington, are visual reminders of which side won. It was the deliberate intent of Montgomery Meigs, Quartermaster General, to make the home of Robert E. Lee into a burial ground for the Union dead. And while Stonewall Jackson rides his horse in heroic statues, so does Philip Sheridan (a Union general who is symbol of much suffering here in the Valley).

On this Memorial Day and other days, I want us to spend less time tearing down our story or elevating and idealizing symbols and more time educating our children (and ourselves) so these stories don't have to be repeated. And yes, I know that is a loathed stance among some right now. But I say it because it matters.

We have been elevating what the Apostle Paul called "shrines made with human hands" into false gods. We have

made people of the past, because they achieved great fame or infamy, into something far beyond anything they would recognize in themselves. We have taken a part of their story and ignored the rest. For some we have given near saint status. For some we have ignored some pretty vile attitudes (feel free to read up on General Nathan Bedford Forrest's less than illustrious post-war activities).

What has touched me in the poetry you heard this morning was that movement from reading words on a stone to recognizing the known in the unknown: son to someone, possibly brother to someone, possibly beloved to another, mourned and grieved for – story unknown, background unknown, belief system unknown – but forever lost on a farm encompassed in cannon and rifle fire.

Not an idolatrous elevation – but a remembrance. Not an intransigent symbol of a political ideology but a visible reminder of where we have been and where we could go again if we continue to divide our nation and our world.

When the Apostle Paul spoke to the people of Athens he proclaimed the Word (with a capital W) of the Unknown God – the One in whom we live and move and have our

being. The One in whom each person on earth lives and moves and has their being.

*...since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.* Think about that as we speak to one another in ALL CAPS. The grief of one is not the joy of another. The defeat of a known way of life (and I am not talking about slavery here – over the centuries there have been many such seismic shifts) is not the victory for another way of life. One viewpoint is not all good and the other all bad. AND NONE OF THEM ARE GOD’S VIEWPOINT because they are human-made. In God’s viewpoint is God’s very design of life – all of us, each of us, are created in a world of God’s own doing so that we might live and work together always seeking the fullness of the One in whom we live and move and have our being. For we are God’s offspring.

Memorial Day is a time to look at the stone and see beyond the images engraved to the heart of the matter. We are each God’s offspring. Each story is only a fraction of the whole story. Yet if we give too much prominence to one part of the story (make it a kind of god object) then we distort the whole story. And if we erase someone else’s story (whether by making someone a non-person unworthy

of participating in the world – or by eradicating the memory of someone’s story) we also distort our common story.

Memorial Day is a time when the tears of God’s weeping over God’s world meet the tears of our losses. But those tears have the power to be the water that allows us to grow in new ways so that God’s vision for God’s beloved offspring might come to fruition.

Amen.