

## The Risk of an Honest Reckoning

I heard a Virginia historian - whom I rather like - lament that the violence in Charlottesville was especially tragic, given that the city and its esteemed university "honor like no other place on earth the architect of American democracy and freedom." He meant Thomas Jefferson, of course, who enshrined the American bedrock-principle of equality in our seminal document, the Declaration of Independence. And were I not a Christian, I would likely still believe that the story was that simple. Thus, in condemning Nazi sympathizers, these angry young men with torches and truncheons, I would otherwise get to hold high the true flame of American democratic principles, too.

But I am a Christian - not that I merely use Jesus' name or claim membership in his tribe, but that I strive, not always successfully, to follow his words and actions while living the distinctive life of his holy community. It's a daily job. I find I need a lot of help doing it.

The day of the violence in Charlottesville, our President said we needed to study what happened there, and I agree with him in this: we as a nation do need sincerely to reflect on matters of privilege, power and the template of Race. The conversations we need to have; we need to have at all levels.

But as Christians, some of us have a special obligation to observe something else: the power of human sin and the subtle way it seeks to rule over us.

To begin to do so, I should acknowledge that "Equality" is not a uniformly biblical notion - in the sense that it can be found throughout all the Scriptures. Ancient Hebrews certainly did not view those of other nations as equal to themselves: they, Israel, were those who had struggled with God, and whom God had elected (for reasons of God's own) to become the Chosen People. This did not mean the Hebrews were morally superior to others, necessarily - no, they needed the continual witness of the prophets to honor God - but their narrative of a chosen status could be seen as leading at times to violence against others (even against the children and infants of others) in the name of the Most High (1 Sam. 15; Ps. 137:9).

But in the person of Jesus, which we who follow him believe to be the clearest and purest expression of God's true Character, there is no partiality to God's mercy and grace (Rom. 2). Indeed, according to Jesus' most important interpreter, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). No social, religious or gender categories take precedence any longer, for God so loves ALL the peoples of the world that He gives his only Son, that those who hold to him shall begin a new and eternal life. This makes us different, in the practice of our daily political and economic habits, from the communities of the world and their quarreling tribes.

In that sense, the Christian ethic of radical equality - that all persons matter equally to the God Who made them and longs to redeem them from the isolation and orphan hood caused by sin, is deeply rooted in our history and in the civilizations we have shaped. All men, and all women and children, are equally created in the image of God - after the example of the one who defended Mary's place at his feet, accepted the hospitality of an officer from an occupying force, and acknowledged a Gentile mother's claim on God's mercy and grace (Lk. 10; Mt. 8; Mk. 7).

That Jesus came not just for the Chosen but for all is very good news for the likes of us. But like the Hebrews, we seem to be in need of continual reminders of God's radical way of loving the unloved, the overlooked, the poor and vulnerable. And to do so, to follow this example, is not going to make us popular with everybody. After all, Jesus' fellow Jewish laity tried to kill him for proclaiming that God's love was bigger than their fierce nationalism, and his unswerving loyalty to God's Kingdom alone (accepting no other) got him murdered by the Roman authorities whose interest was in maintaining Law and Order (Lk. 4; Jn. 19).

I am a Virginian by birth and upbringing. As a child I listened to fabled echoes at The Sunken Road, and stood with reverent awe at Bloody Angle. I learned that Robert E. Lee, the gentleman-soldier

who freed his slaves and loved Virginia like no other, was as much a saint as we'd ever produced. That we could agree on - and so statues of The General, keeping watch over our land, made perfect sense to me. As did his gray-eyed gaze, somber but benevolent, as we walked into the chapel where I went to seminary.

But an honest reckoning is needed, in fact is demanded by our task of holy living. The stories we live have consequences not only for ourselves, but for others. And by the wisdom of the Gospel, we can say with painful certainty that the heritage many of us hold dear is more complex and much darker than we were told. That white supremacists would protest the removal of Lee's statue from the public square makes perfect sense not because Lee is an important part of our history, but because he espoused the idea that whites were innately superior to blacks for his entire life. He freed his wife's slaves, yes - but only after being sued to do so, to honor the terms of his father-in-law's will. Lee owned slaves most of his adult life, and had them tortured, severely even by his day's standards, when they tried to escape their imprisonment. This, too, is our heritage. But it is not the story I learned to tell about who I am.

So when I hear a historian say "you want to talk about a patriot, talk about Jefferson, who brought our country together," I have to acknowledge, yes, who helped birth the world's greatest and oldest democracy, but who himself was enslaved to the lie of racial superiority and the economic system that violated God's holiest laws. Jefferson did imbue our foundations with democratic virtues - but used violence himself to build and sustain his great wealth on the backs on black men and women and (as we now know for fact) to gratify his desires through sexual exploitation, too. The Church enables us to see: we are all in the grip of the stories we learned at our elders' knees, which helped us to understand who we are. The Story Jesus is telling can and will free us from the partial falsehoods of these competing stories. But it is going to hurt.

I do not believe that to follow Jesus means becoming a Liberal or a Conservative, a Republican or a Democrat. But it does mean becoming a citizen of a new Kingdom, and walking the danger-filled road that leads to the Cross. Through self-reflection, risky conversation, and continual gestures of sincere and shared repentance, we do not have to be what we always have been.

We can become His.

-The Rev. Dave Rochford