

The Road Less Traveled – August 18, 2017

Earlier this week the city of Baltimore removed, in the middle of the night, four statues honoring Confederate heroes from its city-owned properties. The statues – honoring among others Gen. Robert E. Lee and Gen. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson – were removed in the wee hours of the morning in a move that city officials hoped would avoid the violent clashes seen last weekend in Charlottesville, VA. The shameful events in Charlottesville has re-sparked a national debate over the balance between acknowledging our past and embracing our future.

The response on social media and elsewhere has been overwhelming (and rightly) condemning of the white supremacists whose hatred and bigotry sparked last weekend’s violence and mostly in favor of removing symbols of slavery in the Deep South. But the other side is still alive and well. I could not help but notice a friend of a friend in Florida posting on Facebook, “You can take down our statues but you can’t take the love and pride that I have for this great land and the people who shaped it, from my heart. Never forget.”

What saddens me the most is that the outrage over last weekend’s events in Charlottesville will fade. It always does. If there are no other similar events, then the story will last a few more news cycles, then be replaced by something else. And when that happens, the debate will fade into the shadows again as well. And that is unfortunate, because it is a debate that desperately needs to happen.

And the truth is that the *debate* hasn’t even started yet. Not really. The renewed calls for the removal of Confederate statues and the Confederate Battle Flag from public venues came in reaction to the violence in Charlottesville, not from an honest exploration of the underlying issues. And predictably, the two sides have become deeply entrenched –justice on one side vs. political correctness on the other.

But the real issue is not political correctness nor justice, it’s the question of how we learn from our history as we move into the future. The truth is that the secession of the Confederate states, which sparked the Civil War, is part of our history. It is a difficult and – for many – a still painful part of our history, but it is a part of who we are today nonetheless. And that is the key.

The Southern states seceded and the Civil War was fought over the issue of slavery. I know, we learned in U.S. History that the Civil War was fought over state’s rights, and that’s true enough. But at the heart of those rights was the right to own African slaves and whether that right would be extended to the territories that had not yet become states. In the end, more than 3 million men fought in the war, and more than 600,000 of them lost their lives.

It was a fight that has extended far beyond the four years that the war actually raged. The battles may have ended with Lee's surrender in April 1865, but the war over how African-Americans are viewed and treated in this country continues today. Contemporary African-Americans have never lived with slavery, but they are the living legacy of that shameful chapter in our country's history. One need only to look at practically every social and economic measure today to acknowledge that truth.

Since 1865, African-Americans have had to fight for every right and opportunity that white Americans enjoyed the day the Civil War started. And whether it was the right to vote, the right to equal education, equal pay or where a black man sit on a bus or what restroom he could use, every step has been an uphill fight.

That fight has its roots in the European slave trade which ultimately kidnapped an entire civilization and sold it into slavery. Nearly 12.5 million Africans were ripped from their homeland, and an estimated 388,000 of them landed here.

Nearly 400 years later – the first slave ship arrived in Virginia in 1619 – surely it is time for real healing to begin. Surely in 2017, we can finally begin to see that history through the eyes of the descendants whose lives continue to be touched by it. Descendants whose parents grew up being told that they were something less than a white person. Descendants whose grandparents grew up free in theory, but remained enslaved still an oppressive social and economic reality that made them anything but free. A system that saw thousands of human beings mowed down by fire hoses and attacked by dogs, physically abused and tortured for daring to claim the same rights that the rest of America's citizens enjoyed.

The Confederacy and all of the issues, beliefs and passions that birthed it, is part of our history. And it is a history we must acknowledge if we are to ensure that we never repeat it. But there is a huge difference between acknowledging history and celebrating it. And that's the real issue. To celebrate a shameful history is to give it credibility and to take that credibility away from the people who were damaged by it – and are still being damaged today.

It's time we stop talking and start listening. Our faith tells us that to truly love our neighbors we must be willing to walk a mile in their shoes. In other words, see the world through their eyes. Only then can we view history in a way that builds our future.

See you Sunday.