

BULLETIN -- AUGUST 20

Statues in the park, flags on the poles. Home to the University of Virginia and to Thomas Jefferson's mountaintop home of Monticello, Charlottesville is a beautiful city about a quarter the size of Grand Rapids. On August 12, it suddenly attracted international attention as hundreds of white supremacists marched to protest what has become a contentious issue in many communities around the country: the removal of symbols of the Confederacy. As we are so often reminded, there lingers a great deal of infection beneath the scabs of racial wounds in our country.

You know how once a wound on your finger, elbow, or knee has begun to heal, you slowly begin to forget about it. It scabs over, dries, and soon you no longer have to even keep a bandage on it. That's JUST WHEN you're bound to scrape or knock it on something else. The resulting pain is often greater than that of the original wound because now you also had a scab that's pulling away. Your days or weeks of healing are set back, perhaps leading to an even larger, uglier scar when the healing has finally been successful. This is a bit of an analogy to the historical, psychological, and emotional wounds created by such things as racial injustice or sexual abuse.

The very same symbol can have a different meaning or impact on the very same person at different times. My mother had fond memories of my First Communion day in 1955, and of that of my sister a few years later. But in between, Mom happened to be at Mass at St. Francis Xavier when the class three years younger than I was marching in for their First Communion. Mom broke down in tears, she later recalled. My brother, Jerry, stillborn in 1951, would have been in that class. Mom handled things very gently and objectively most of the time; but that morning, just the sight of the children dressed up to receive their Lord for the first time was enough to reopen all the underlying feelings that are frequently never completely resolved in this life. They become part of us as life goes on, and help make us who we are. Poke a little too hard in the right spot and you'll be amazed at what's waiting to be recalled from an individual or even a community memory.

In Charlottesville, the statues of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee were erected in 1921 and 1924, respectively, some 60 years after the Civil War. Those were nativist years, and the Klan was on the rise throughout the South, in Indiana, and even here in Grand Rapids. A few years earlier, D.W. Griffith's epic and racially derogatory film *Birth of a Nation* was the first motion picture ever screened at the White House, at the direction of President Woodrow Wilson, whose own racial and class biases are well documented. Lynchings and the terror they bred were common in Southern states. It was in that atmosphere that two of Charlottesville's very successful black neighborhoods were bulldozed and the statues erected, as very graphic reminders to African Americans of who considered themselves to be in charge. In succeeding decades, the city's urban renewal projects were dubbed by author James Baldwin as "Negro removal," for everyone understood that established white neighborhoods would never be touched.

That was not an uncommon occurrence in either South or North. Without a thought to the heritage and the relationships involved, Detroit's old "Black Bottom" was removed in the mid-1950's to build the Chrysler freeway. For many people, the freeway was a way from work downtown to a home in the suburbs; for many other people, the

freeway destroyed a home and a neighborhood they could call their own, and displaced them into areas where they were clearly unwelcome. In Grand Rapids and many other places, banks practiced redlining of neighborhoods so that non-white citizens could not obtain loans to buy homes where they wished, even when they could afford them.

The point is not to rehash history in order to make anyone feel guilty. It's important to review it in order to understand how deeply old wounds penetrate the human psyche, individually and collectively. Without that understanding, we cannot comprehend how apparently unrelated or unintended consequences can arise as a result of actions undertaken without malice but perceived as hurtful by others. But sometimes it helps to honestly examine our motives and to explain them. One fine spring day in the last couple years, someone asked me if the American flag was flying on the rectory on Cinco de Mayo as a kind of "in your face" statement to Mexican Americans. I replied by saying that the flag flies there every day, and I asked why I would not do so on a day which is a holiday in another nation. I do not expect the Mexican flag in Mexico to give way to the American flag on the Fourth of July. That led to a further question.

"Well, why do you fly the flag at all? Isn't that a little off-putting to those who are undocumented?"

"Excuse me," I replied, "but if people are in this country, documented or not, they presumably came here precisely to enjoy the very freedoms that this flag symbolizes. Rather than being off-putting, I should think it would be a sign of welcome, just like the flag flying over a public school or a city hall. I fly the flag remembering my own father and relatives and friends and people right from this neighborhood who have served or are serving in the military to preserve those freedoms. I also fly it because, as chaplain and therefore a member of the Grand Rapids Police and Fire Departments, I want to show respect for the service that these uniformed men and women perform for all of us, citizens and visitors alike."

"But do other people see it that way?"

"All they have to do is ask, as you did. They might also object to the cross on the church or to the Roman collar around my neck. How much do I have to change to become the non-entity that some people might prefer?"

The point is, there are very legitimate arguments and many emotions on many sides of an issue like this. The people of Charlottesville are free to throw their city council out of office at the next election or before; but for now, their representative municipal government has voted on a certain course of action. That is a legal and valid decision, made with a hope to help heal old wounds. For outsiders to invade a community with violent intent to protest a legitimate decision when they likely understand only one side of the issue? That's harmful interference.

Now, I am not in favor of re-writing history to please the whim of the current moment. That was done by the Soviet Communists, whose goal was to obliterate all memory of history before them. When decades later the statues of Lenin and Stalin were toppled, people danced in the streets. Even soldiers joined in the fun.

On the other hand, people in one American city demanded that the picture of a bishop who was himself found guilty of sexual abuse of minors be removed from the photo gallery of bishops in a local Catholic high school. My take on that is: leave it there, as a stark reminder that we are *all* capable of the most dastardly deeds if we neglect the grace of God held out to us. The names and embarrassing stories of the sins of King

David and of Simon Peter were not removed from the Bible, though they might well have had the authority to demand it. Clearly, God wanted it revealed! Painful as it might be for those who have suffered the effects of adultery, denial, or abuse, we should not try to change history to make it more comfortable. Hang it out there, so we have a measure of how far we have come. Then perhaps we can come to see that people like Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant, for example, were not one-dimensional: that Lee's decision to fight for the Confederacy was a wrenching one that went against everything he had stood for as a West Point graduate and military officer and gentleman; and that Grant's victory was certainly not due to any personal virtue. Thomas Jefferson was a slave owner -- but that's not *all* he was; just as, by God's grace, Dennis Morrow is not *only* a sinner. In an era of 5-second attention spans and sound bites, symbols like statues and flags cannot easily convey all that they intend. They call us to really listen to and hear *one another* so we can share how they affect us, and gain better perspectives on the world we are challenged by our Creator to share. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Thought for the week: Entertain the possibility that you're wrong. Speaking from personal experience, I can say it happens more than you might think.