

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

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XI Pentecost, Matthew 15:10-28

*Oh, how good and pleasant it is,
when brethren live together in unity!ⁱ*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning!

Our family dog is Teddy: a two-year-old Goldendoodle who, despite his price and the distance we drove to find him, is of the rare, long-haired-and-generously-shedding variety of the breed. Even so, Teddy (or “The T-Bear”) is *sweet* – sweet as can be! – and he is sharp as a tack. When we leave the house, we lead our dog to his large kennel in the laundry area near the back door, and, for most of his life with us, Teddy would go to his place without much trouble. However, just as he now turns his head when he hears the word “walk” – *walk?* – this summer, Teddy has learned to hide when either Missy or I ask, “Someone, please put up Teddy!” before we head out for an errand. Therefore, we’ve taken to speaking **in code** as we begin moving toward the door.

“Somebody return the eagle to the nest!”

“Michael!...Virginia! Park the car in the garage!”

“Young people, let the sword be sheathed!”

In the last couple of weeks, our code has become increasingly ridiculous, but we all still clearly understand the communication – including Teddy – who now seems capable of discerning *vibe* as well as language.

As you may know, I grew up in Monroe and Shreveport, Louisiana, fishing brim and chinquapin with a cane pole on Bayou DeSiard, and hunting ducks out of a twelve-foot aluminum boat, both before I was old enough to write my name. For most of my life, my idea of nirvana has been a toolbox of wrenches, an ice chest of beer, and a 1965-1972, American-made muscle car that needs my attention. More recently, about the most fun I have is bushhogging on a thirty-year-old Case International Harvester tractor, and while I like my rock-n-roll Southern fried, there ain’t nothin’ wrong with an afternoon of Johnny or Merle or Waylon.

By most any conception – including the literal definition – I am a *redneck*...raised by rednecks...in two cities chock full of rednecks. While I realize people use that term pejoratively, I no longer find the title offensive when thinking of myself. For a good part of my life I did, but as those contemporary prophets The Drive-By-Truckersⁱⁱ would explain, I now acknowledge that part of my identity as parcel to the “duality of the Southern thing”...*the duality of the Southern thing*.ⁱⁱⁱ I am increasingly proud to reclaim the more positive inheritances of my Deep South rearing: good manners; the sound of my grandparents’ screen door; small-engine repair; and the taste of PeGe’s minced-beef sandwiches.^{iv}

Even so, my reclamation and reconciliation of these personal identity markers does not blind me to the opposing half of that “Southern thing’s” duality. Indeed, the opposite is true: in recognizing the *positive*, I see in clearer relief the *negative* elements of my history. I cannot claim that I’m expert of much, but I suspect I know as well as anyone *redneck code* – the Deep South’s language without words – for whether I want it or not, it is my native tongue. And, friends, let me tell you if you did not know: a man draped in a Confederate flag, carrying an assault rifle on his shoulder and a buck knife on his belt, standing beside a statue of Robert E. Lee and shouting about his heritage, is not identifying himself as a benevolent historian. He’s grieving his loss of power; he’s announcing his confusion; and he’s looking for nothing other than trouble; all in a code that is scarcely code at all.

Among the most important tasks of the Church is **to tell the truth**...to tell the truth in the face of the lies we tell ourselves and the lies that others ask us to believe. Fundamentally, this is Jesus’ charge in saying, “Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.”^v

That is, *You who are my followers, do not make yourselves subject to their dishonesty, for, if you do, you will end up in their same, dark hole.*

So, first let us speak the truth: the idea that the white supremacists who marched last weekend in Charlottesville intended to be peaceable is a lie...a dangerous, *dangerous* lie, for in allowing it to stand, *we* become complicit in its aims of division and intimidation. The media attention and mainstreaming of their racist platforms in the days since threaten our Christian hope and set our common *humanity* in peril, much less our American ideals.

Further, and as Jesus continues, he warns that the pursuit of purity for its own sake is a distraction, and that, instead, words and actions measure one’s righteousness. “Listen and understand,”^{vi} Jesus says to the crowds, unafraid of the religious lawyers, “it is not what goes *into* the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes *out* of the mouth that defiles...Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the **heart**, and...out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. *These* are what defile a person.”^{vii}

That is, *Your personal spiritual fitness means nothing – nothing! – if you injure others with your words or your actions, your silences or your inactions.*

With God in Christ as our witness, then, let us reflect on *our* words and *our* actions – “things done and left undone”^{viii} – and, from our *Christian* perspective, let us consider the question of Confederate memorials, the issue before us on every screen and page.

In a recent paper, the Director of Ole Miss’ Center for Civil War Research^{ix} helpfully frames such a discussion, explaining, “the impulse to build monuments suggests supporters may be less than certain that future generations will accept *their* values...[and] Monuments...often tell us more about the people who build them than the people they intend to commemorate.”^x

Hear that again: “*Monuments...often tell us more about the people who build them than the people they intend to commemorate.*”^{xi}

I learned in my Eighth Grade Louisiana History class that Shreveport briefly served as the capital of the Confederacy following Robert E. Lee's surrender in 1865. I remember feeling pride in the prestige of such a lofty legacy, though I do remember wondering about the depth of that honor when I learned of "Fort Humbug," the fenced bluff overlooking the intersection of Stoner Avenue and Youree Drive, on the main drag to downtown.

As the story goes, rations and munitions were especially low among the Confederate troops stationed there along that Red River high ground at Fort Turnbull (as it was known at the time), so the commanding officer, General Magruder, ordered the men to cut pine trees; to char their trunks; to trim them into lengths the size of cannons; and to rest the blackened logs on the axels of their wagons. The Confederate men did as ordered and positioned the dummy cannons on the vista, presenting to all the world and the approaching Union company as a well-armed force. Upon surveying the scene, Magruder commented, "That's not going to work...that's a *humbug*."^{xii}

As it happened, the farce *did* work: the Union contingent retreated, and the name stuck. Today, a mock cannon of the sort the men of 1865 might have assembled rests on that bluff. While a simple tribute, the monument offers an ambivalent memorial to ingenuity and vulnerability, to foolhardiness and desperation, perhaps an appropriate reflection on the Civil War.

Downtown Shreveport hosts a different monument. Outside the Caddo Parish Courthouse a tall, stone soldier of the Confederacy leans on his musket. Around him preside four stone busts of four Confederate generals. Carved decorations – a Confederate coat of arms and a Confederate flag – adorn the rifleman's pedestal that bears the inscription, "Lest We Forget Confederate History."^{xiii}

My Shreveport forbearers dedicated that monument on May 1, 1906.^{xiv} As one indication of Southern race relations during that time – roughly two generations since Emancipation, a time when most of Shreveport's African-Americans forty years or older would have been born in slavery – from September 22 to September 24, Atlanta suffered "The Race Riot of 1906." For two lawless days and three nights, as many as 10,000^{xv} white men and boys took to the streets with clubs and stones, beating and killing black men, women, and children.^{xvi} When asked of his strategy to end this massacre, Atlanta's mayor explained, "The best way to prevent a race riot depends entirely upon the cause. If your inquiry has anything to do with the present situation in Atlanta then I would say the only remedy is to *remove* the cause. As long as the black brutes assault our white women, just so will they be unceremoniously dealt with."^{xvii}

Notably, the Caddo Parish courthouse had not yet been built in 1906. Rather, organizers selected the monument location because upon those grounds once stood Louisiana's Confederate capital.^{xviii} The courthouse site would be chosen in 1926, and plans called for the existing monument to center the new campus. Of those years two decades later, Civil War historian Adam Goodheart explains, "In the early 1920s, America was in the grip of a huge revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Its recruits were responding partly to the growing movement for black civil rights, which had been emboldened by the millions of African-Americans who had contributed to the U.S. victory in World War 1...The original organization of white-robed Confederate veterans had lain dormant since the Reconstruction era...but the new Klan was far larger and more pervasive, claiming as many as 5 million members..."

“The Confederate nostalgia embodied in the statues [erected and celebrated during those years] offered a **soft-serve version of racial domination**, one whose public image involved girls in white dresses laying bouquets of flowers, not men in white sheets burning crosses. The hard-liners[– robes off, of course –]joined [these] celebrations. So[, too,] did the moderate, pro-business boosters of the [so-called] New South...”^{xix}

On college football Saturdays at LSU, we roll the cage with our live Bengal Tiger mascot outside the tunnel through which the opposing team enters the field. For many seasons, the cheerleaders would prod Mike The Tiger’s backside just before the visitors took their sideline, provoking a fierce and frightening roar that scared those running by like an older brother hiding behind the hallway door. Mike in his cage and 100,000 screaming fans intended to send a message. What messages did we in the South intend by building our contemporary courthouses where Confederate capitals once stood? What code did we speak – if we encoded that message at all – when we memorialized Confederate officers and politicians in bronze, stone, and marble, and then positioned the monuments to stand sentinel before our courts of law?

At Good Shepherd, we have recently completed a *remarkable* construction program, during which we have transformed two blocks of our city, one on each side of downtown. In that process, we paid attention to *every* detail – in fact, to details as small as the orientation of a flat-head screw’s slit on the brass push plates of those Narthex doors – because we understand and we understand that every detail of this space makes a claim about who we are and the community we aspire to be: we enlarged our foyer because we want to enhance our welcome of those who come here for comfort and inspiration; we expanded our footprint across I-35 because we believe God calls us to find new neighbors with whom to strengthen the Gospel’s witness; we raised a bell tower because we want to sound our song of hope and love and mercy; and we take good care of all we have, because we want to demonstrate our faithful Stewardship. We know the code...*we know the code!*...and we know just *exactly* how such messaging works.

So, again, of Shreveport let us tell the truth: that Confederate monument’s commendation to “never forget” has existed as a threat, a threat breathed – hot as a tiger’s roar and loud as the same – for any African-American who would enter that courthouse seeking “justice.” In its historical context, that soldier announced the supremacy of the white man who claimed power and authority his exclusive possessions.

Now, in our own moment, every day that Lee and Davis and Beauregard loom over our public squares, **they speak for us**...they speak for us in a code that is scarcely code at all. No matter what we might *prefer* these memorials to say, every day that they stand, we consent to *all* they have intended and therefore still declare, and, if we respond with silence, then their builders’ intimidation becomes *our* intimidation; their racism is *our* racism; and with what flows from their cold, stone hearts, we will defile ourselves.

I needed most of forty years to find the courage to confront my past honestly and to accept my Southern inheritances, their good and their ill. At times, that experience has been *crucifying* – and I both lived it and considered it *in privilege*...I can scarcely imagine that kind of reclamation and reconciliation for those who have suffered from what I so blithely benefited.

The task of such honest reflection for us as a nation promises to be *infinitely* more complex and difficult – there will be no easy answers, and I suggest no simple solution – yet, we as Christians can begin that deserving labor, even if only on our corners of Woodland and Windsor, because we know that the story of our God does not end on the cross...*we know that the story of our God does not end on the cross*. Therefore, we have strength, for we set our faith in **Resurrection**, *even* when what we experience is crucifixion – *especially* when what we experience is crucifixion – whether the mortal danger of suffering slavery, segregation, and suspicion, or the demanding experience of testing our most dearly held assumptions and realizing the unholy power of what we did not intend or choose...or, more grimly, what we did.

The God who raised Jesus Christ *longs* to be with us in this righteous struggle.

Let us pray:

O God, you made us in your image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all people would serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

ⁱ Psalm 133:1

ⁱⁱ DBT tells the truth, and *Southern Rock Opera* narrates an important thread of my own history. For many years, I felt no permission to acknowledge socially my redneck roots. As fanboy as the attribution may seem, the clarity of Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley on this dynamic has been life-giving to me...that and their electric guitars.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hood, Patterson & The Drive-By Truckers. “The Three Great Alabama Icons.” *Southern Rock Opera*. 2001.

^{iv} Ray’s PeGe (in Monroe) caught fire last December, and a foretaste of heaven went up in smoke with it. In addition to the 4/\$1 minced-beef sandwiches, their ham po-boys, homemade fries, and dark gravy...Lord, have mercy.

^v Matthew 15:14

^{vi} Matthew 15:10

^{vii} Matthew 15:11,17-20

^{viii} From “The Confession of Sin” in Morning Prayer, Rite II (among several places) in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

^{ix} John R. Neff is the Director of the Center: <http://www.civilwarcenter.olemiss.edu/>.

^x Neff, John R, et al. “A Brief Historical Contextualization of the Confederate Memorial at the University of Mississippi.” <https://history.olemiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2016/07/A-Brief-Historical-Contextualization-of-the-Confederate-Monument-at-the-University-of-Mississippi.pdf>.

^{xi} I found the Neff article especially helpful as the Ole Miss memorial was, like that of Shreveport, dedicated in 1906, and – again, like the Shreveport monument – was sponsored by a women’s organization. Neff, et al, historically contextualize the Mississippi monument, in part, through the perspective of its organizer, Nellie Durham Deupree: “Deupree explained...the UDC’s ‘purpose’ in its memorialization work...Black social and political advancements during the 1860s and 1870s, she suggested, had been a tragic mistake that served only to humiliate the white people of the South.”

^{xii} I attribute this quote from the (questionable!) online source “Roadside America,” and its details trace the same story that Ms. Marjorie Davis taught me in Eighth Grade at Youree Drive Middle School, and that the historical marker remembers: <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/34339>. While Ms. Davis was solid as a rock, the point here is that these narratives affirm a common *mythology* of Fort Humbug, regardless of the historicity.

^{xiii} Prime, John Andrew. “The History of ‘The Last Confederate Flag.’” *The Shreveport Times*. July 4, 2015.

^{xiv} This monument has attracted controversy this summer of 2017, and several *Times* articles contributed to my understanding of the memorial. Notably, in Prime’s Fourth of July piece from 2015, he includes two details about the memorial that I did know or remember: that the word “Love” on one side of the pedestal likely intends to offer remembrance of the locals who died in the war. Also, the word “History” that intends to follow “Confederate” has fallen from the memorial, perhaps helped by vandals. The National Register’s reasoning for including the monument among its Historic Places focuses on the women who commissioned it, women whom the sculptor acknowledged with the inclusion of the Greek muse, Cilo, looking up to the rifleman.

^{xv} In a recent Washington Post article, Karen L. Cox, “a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte,” makes claim that “an estimated 10,000 white men and boys” comprised the Atlanta mobs. I cannot find her sourcing for that number, though the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* does put the number in the “thousands.”

^{xvi} Mixon, Gregory. “Atlanta Race Riot of 1906.” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. 2005-2015. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/atlanta-race-riot-1906>.

^{xvii} “The Atlanta Riots.” *The New York Times*. September 25, 1906. The italics is my emphasis.

^{xviii} Prime references historian Eric J. Brock, who explains arguments concerning the conveyance of the courthouse’s property, from the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) to Caddo Parish: “To justify the parish’s continued use of the property, the Police Jury cited the state’s squatter law.” Further, a 1954 offer by “an East Coast business concern” at *triple* the land’s value was declined, “but not before a title search revealed...no actual title or deed ever was conveyed.” A Caddo Parish website article, “Historic Courthouse,” notes a vestige of these controversies, explaining, that the “land on which the [Confederate] monument sits...does not belong to the Commission, but to the [UDC].” These challenges and the attendant efforts in response suggest local leaders gave considerable and careful thought to the courthouse’s location, as well as its persistence in its particular place.

^{xix} Goodheart, Adam. “Regime Change in Charlottesville.” *Politico*. August 16, 2017. I hope Goodheart’s language of “soft-serve racial domination” and his image of “laying bouquets of flowers” will continue to haunt and challenge me to be careful about what more malevolent privileges and practices I unthinkingly accept. I added the bold in the text to note my emphasis.