

Sermon

Year A, Proper 16

August 27, 2017

How many of you like history? If I did a survey, I imagine it would be less than half (maybe even less than that!). You see, I was a history major. When I left Georgia Tech and calculus and transferred to Georgia State, I switched majors from Industrial Management to History. I never regretted it, though history is a major that can be scary when you graduate during a recession. Luckily, I got a good job. I was happy that twenty-four years later, when I applied to seminaries, they PREFERRED a liberal arts degree.

As a history major, when I would talk to non-history majors, most of them would roll their eyes when they learned what I studied. “History is just dates about battles and generals and presidents and other things I don’t care about.” I get that. History is often taught at a pretty superficial level and at times by teachers who have a hard time inspiring their students. I was blessed with GREAT history teachers—from Ms. Frances McKibben in high school to Roberta Bondi and Lewis Ayers in seminary. History really is fascinating.

It’s fascinating because history is made up of stories—human stories that help us to understand who we are; and help us to understand who other people are, too. But history takes some work. For professional historians, they research primary sources-- like newspaper articles from the time period; and legal documents; and even archaeological records. Their works are published and peer reviewed by other historians. When a history book is well written and well researched, it is an academic work of art that is a pleasure to read.

Here is a challenge, though—many of us don’t take the time or don’t have the interest to find reliable, academically rigorous histories and read them. I do recommend that we take the time—that is why we offer programs like EFM and Just Faith so we have an opportunity for more serious reading and study and reflection. But what about the rest of us?

First, remember whether we study it or not, history is important. As William Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” History exists in our lives and shapes them as surely as the rivers shapes the mountain valleys. When some of us tell other people, “That’s in the past—just get over it,” it is at best misinformed. When we say that, we usually want the other people to get over THEIR past and leave our own past alone, thank you very much.

The importance of history is playing out (again) in our current public discourse. It is a bigger issue than whether to leave up monuments to Confederate leaders in public places; though that is symptomatic of the deeper issue. When people defend what those monuments mean, whether on social media or in real life, they tend to provide a similar narrative: the Civil War was not about slavery; my great-great grandfather fought for the Confederacy and he was a brave and good man; my family did not own slaves; the war and Reconstruction devastated

the South; the North was complicit in the American political and economic systems of slavery. Four of those five statements are (or may be) true. But when people defend that perspective, sometimes passionately, they tend to leave out or minimize other parts of our history. One of the main parts that is ignored is the institution of race-based slavery, what Jim Wallis called, “America’s original sin.”

It is important for all of us to understand, as best we can, that part of our history. No “yeah, but...” defensiveness. Just read, listen, and learn. Read a book like *A Peoples History of the United States*; or watch the PBS series *Underground* that portrays Harriet Tubman. Do whatever we need to do to learn our common story—the one that includes *all* the members of the American family. That approach does not require us to minimize our great-great-grandfather’s bravery or forget the fact that our family was poor and our ancestors worked their way up from the devastation of the Civil War. That is part of the story, too, of course. It must be included. It is not either/or; but we must include *all* our stories or it is so incomplete.

This was made clear to me when I attended a panel discussion at Atlanta University. The panel included people like Ambassador Andrew Young and our bishop, Rob Wright, and other political and civil rights leaders and academics. One person might surprise you—Cooter from the Dukes of Hazard. Do you remember him? His real name is Ben Jones and he was a two-term Congressman from Georgia.

During the panel, he told us that he was the only person he knew who was a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans and a member of the NAACP. Mr. Jones marched with Dr. King in the 1960’s. He is a proud Democrat. For him, the Confederate flag means the memory of his relatives in Virginia who fought bravely for their homeland even if their cause was wrong. For me and I think many others there, we experienced a real dissonance. Yet Mr. Jones received respect from even the young people. We did not understand his perspective but we respected him because of the integrity of his life. We need to strive to do that with one another.

In today’s world, that can be hard for many of us to do. It is easy to see the world in black and white. And to be clear, there is a right and wrong that needs to be acknowledged—race-based slavery was a great evil. **Full stop.** We need to pray and study and learn that part of our story until it lives deep in our soul. And as we learn it, we can honor the other parts of our common story, too. That is how we can grow together and work for justice as people of faith and as citizens of this great land.

So our parish will continue to offer ways for us to learn and grow through Wednesday evening programs; and in Sunday school; and offerings like EFM and Just Faith. That is my responsibility as your pastor and as a person who is on the journey with you to learn and grow and be more loving and just. Though there is much discord in our public discourse, I believe the majority of people have good will and are willing to listen, learn, and work together. We cannot allow some misguided souls marching with tiki torches to determine how we relate to each other.

Patrick Phillips came to speak at Cumming UMC in April to talk about his book, *Blood at the Root*. Since then, a small group of us in the wider community have been meeting monthly to discuss what we can do in response to the local history we learned in Patrick's book. The past two months we have had some of the descendants of the families that were forced out of Forsyth to join our meetings. I asked one of the gentlemen this past week, "What would you like to see come from our work?" He said this, "I do not want anyone to give me anything. I know the people alive today are not the people who did this to my ancestors. What I want is respect. I want acknowledgement of what happened. Then I hope we can work together to do good for our community." This is the type of conversation and work we need to do as people of faith and good will.

For me, I am a proud Southerner. Nothing will change that. Our region's music is the best in the country—from Southern Gospel to New Orleans Jazz to Memphis Blues; from Nashville Country to Macon Rock to Atlanta Hip Hop. Our food is the best, too—okra, fried chicken, pork barbecue, cornbread, cat's head biscuits, collard greens, and on and on—I feel bad for the rest of the country that haven't experienced all that. I love our neighbors, too. The true gentleness and deep-bred manners that cause us—at our best—to care for one another. These are all things I am proud of and always will be. I know many of you are proud of the South, too.

But I also know the dark side of our Southern history that is deeply connected to our nation's history. I have read and studied it. In college I wrote my senior thesis on the Civil War. The main focus was on the role of the churches in the North and the South in justifying the causes for the war, especially over slavery. The truth of our region's systemic wrong over centuries does not invalidate all that is good about us. But it is critical for us to know our history—really know it—and then live differently if we are to be good neighbors.

After the shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in 2015, President Obama gave the eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney. He was the pastor of the church who was killed along with eight members of his flock while they were at a Bible study. The President's message is one of the best sermons I have ever heard. I commend it to you—you can find it on the internet. Here is one line from what he said:

Reverend Pinckney once said, "Across the South, we have a deep appreciation of history - we haven't always had a deep appreciation of each other's history." What is true in the South is true for America.

We must learn each other's history. It must shape our lives today as surely as our own particular history shapes how we live and think and believe. There are other books I can recommend and movies we can watch together. We can continue to reach out to people who are different from us, not only for conversation but for worshiping together and serving together and having fun together. The divisions behind us that seem to stretch out before us are not inevitable. We serve a good God who is bigger than our worst selves.

God calls to us today just like in the days of John the Baptist, "Repent and believe the good news." If we do repent and believe-- and live and proclaim-- this good news of God's love for all, then we can be part of the solution our country and our world so desperately needs. Amen.