

“Step Into the Story and Let It Step Through You”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28

It started with a statue of a dead man on a horse. It ended with a living woman dead. That’s the immense power of symbols. They contain an almost inexhaustible supply of meaning, which is why we’ve saturated this sacred space with them. Symbols make claims on truth and shape identity, often in subtle ways.

For some people that statue in Charlottesville symbolizes oppression and bigotry and hatred. Most Confederate war memorials were built during the Jim Crow era. They were created for many reasons, but it’s hard to deny that one of the reasons was to send a message of intimidation to black people, a reminder to them that they might not be slaves anymore, but they’re certainly not citizens.

Yet for some people the statue of Robert E. Lee riding Traveler symbolizes something else: an honorable man of integrity and courage; a central figure of our nation’s history and its cultural heritage. For these people, the sinister side of the mixed motive that erected the statue in the first place no longer remains, because times have changed.

Both perspectives are valid. A symbol, because of its richness and complexity, can often yield many meanings, even contradictory ones. The cross of Christ, for example, can cause us to feel great sorrow and guilt for the suffering of Jesus caused by our sin. At the same time, the cross brings us joy, because we know that on the cross, Jesus saved us. For some non-Christians, the cross symbolizes judgment and hypocrisy.

However, just because an interpretation of a symbol is valid does not mean that it contributes equally to the common good. We share a responsibility to anchor our nation in the

bedrock values of justice, freedom, and peace, and to communicate those values consistently and clearly. When a symbol no longer serves those purposes, because it is easily and consistently hijacked and exploited by hate and racism, then its continued presence in the public sphere becomes very hard to justify.

However, if a person wanted the statue to stay for its historical and cultural significance, and if a person felt strongly enough to exercise their first amendment rights of free speech to publicly protest its removal, that's fine. But at the first sight of a swastika, that person should have left. Why would a person with those motives march on the same side of the street with neo-Nazis, the KKK, or white supremacists?

The swastika is a symbol that possesses many meanings, none of them good. The shouted slogan, "Jews will not replace us," is unambiguous and inexcusable. To support, in even the slightest way, hateful, racist, and anti-Semitic ideas, or the people who espouse them, is a grave sin. So is the use of violence for any purpose other than the defense of the innocent and one's own life. We learned, or should have learned, from the Civil Rights movement that non-violent protest and civil disobedience leads to victory against the forces of brutal oppression and racism.

We need to learn from what happened in Charlottesville last weekend, because it will happen again. If future events prove me wrong, my joy will be boundless, but I think we all know better. More people will be hurt. More people will die. More damage will be done to an already fragile body politic paralyzed by mutual distrust and disdain that nearly eliminates the possibility of compromise for the common good.

Caught up in this whirlwind that feels beyond our influence, much less beyond our control, we wonder what to do. How can we prepare for the next Charlottesville, or better yet

prevent it? How can we respond faithfully? How can Jesus lead us to a time where we won't always be waiting for the next Charlottesville to grieve? We do what we always do. We start with the Bible, the living word where God chooses the dwell.

It is there where we find healing for our hurt, clarity in our confusion, courage when our fear keeps us complacent. It is there where we find hope in our despair, see the fruits of faith, and learn a way of life that loves with discipline, obeys the Lord, and helps usher in an unsurpassable peace that transcends conflicts that will not cease. It is there, in the living word, where we learn the dangers of complacency and the rewards of answering God's call, despite the suffering and sacrifice involved with picking up our cross and following our Savior.

And if the Bible is a living word, and not a dead letter, then we can live in it and through it. So step into the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Don't stop at hearing and reading. It's good to do that, but don't stop there. Step into the story.

Her daughter suffers from a demon, an agent of evil. Imagine that's your child or grandchild thrashing about out of control, helpless, under the sway of a force that wants nothing less than to destroy her. The woman pleads to Jesus for help, but he ignores her. So she chases him and the disciples, shouting and begging, until the disciples couldn't take it anymore and asked Jesus to make her go away – sort of like how we feel about the issue of racism. Please make it go away.

It's a disturbing scene, because that's not the Jesus we thought we knew. For him to ignore someone in need breaks a pattern that calls into question his identity, the true nature of his mercy. Maybe he was in such a hurry to get someplace else that he simply couldn't be bothered. Some, trying to excuse Jesus' behavior, think he was testing her faith, but Jesus was quite clear.

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” In other words, he came to save the Jewish people, and this Canaanite woman didn’t belong to that tribe and, therefore, wasn’t worth the trouble.

What’s worse, Jesus told her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” That was one of the harshest insults of his day. They didn’t have the same fondness for dogs as we do. Some dogs were domesticated, but most of them were wild back then, dangerous and disgusting. They fought vultures for carrion to eat, and that’s just nasty. You could translate Old Yeller into Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin, send it back in a time machine, and nobody would shed a single tear at the end.

But this woman was desperate. Somehow she knew that only Jesus could cast out the demon. Only Jesus could make her daughter whole again. So in response to his rejection, she humbled herself and said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” and the walls of separation which had stood solid for centuries came tumbling down, and Jesus praised her faith and healed her daughter.

We may never fully understand this perplexing episode in Jesus’ ministry. Why did he ignore and insult her? Why does he seem to have changed his mind? The why eludes us, but we know what Jesus did and what it means for him to have broken through the barrier of ethnic and religious identity, to include a person who didn’t really belong.

Step into Paul’s story. Imagine yourself pacing a small room with a dirt floor and mud walls, dictating a letter to a group of Christians in Rome you’ve never met before. You plan to go there, and you hope the letter might pave the way, but you’ve gotten information, perhaps from the Romans themselves, that things aren’t going so well. There’s a lot of strife in the community between the Christians who grew up Jewish and those who didn’t, the Gentiles, who had stopped praying to false gods and started following Jesus.

It's a complicated situation, with no easy solutions but plenty of fine lines to walk. So you pray and think about it and then pray some more. You want to be fair. You want to send a letter that's balanced, that tells both groups to stand down so that they can stand together. You compose in your mind an argument that you hope will stop their arguments, an argument that will refocus the fractured Romans on what matters most, the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

So you go back and forth, telling the Jews why the Gentiles belong and the Gentiles why the Jews belong. You tell them that they are equal in God's sight, despite their differences, and that just because most Jews rejected Jesus it doesn't mean that God has rejected the Jews, "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." And you sign it and seal it and send it with a messenger, hoping that through your work God might bring repentance and renewal, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Step into the story of Jesus and Paul, of the Canaanite woman and the Romans, and see the common thread that runs right through them both. Those who don't belong, those who are different, those judged as inferior find acceptance and inclusion. The barriers that keep people apart demolished so that God's love can purge prejudice so that someday we can sing with the Psalmist, "Oh, how good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity!"

In God's story, you can't hate the haters, because then both of you will be the same, and that's not the unity God wants and we need. Be compassionate toward those who feel cast out and marginalized, regardless of the color of their skin or the creed or ideology they profess. By all means, denounce and resist the racist rhetoric and the violence, but we need to see what God sees – one of His beloved children, created in His own image and likeness, frightened by the future, afraid of being left behind and shut out. We need to pray for the hateful to repent, even as

we repent of our hatred and our complacency, our sitting by the sidelines as mere spectators tut-tutting, but doing nothing to engage and inspire change.

Step into the story and the story will step through you into a world where demons dwell, where people need healing, where the walls that divide people still stand high and thick. Beg God for forgiveness and the power to forgive. Beg God like a desperate Canaanite woman for the grace to overcome the darkness so that the light of Christ will shine forth like the dawn.

Step into the story and the story will step through you. Only God knows what might happen through you and to you, but we need know only this. We have been chosen. We have been sent. On the day of judgement, God may ask, “What’s your story? Where did you stand?” May we live in such a way that we can honestly say, “My story is yours, Lord, and I stood with you.” Amen.