

Sermon – 4th Pentecost
Matthew 10:34-42
June 28, 2020

“Statues That Must Come Down”

These days in our country there is a great deal of attention being paid to statues, and in some cases institutions and buildings that bear the names of history’s leaders in government and education. If you have been paying attention to any of this, you know it revolves around the racial strains our nation is feeling – sadly, again - over the killing of some of our nation’s black citizens. Calls to “do something” are wide ranging – the best of them involve peaceful civic action and the church in prayer, even taking the lead in sober, honest conversation and self-examination with black brothers and sisters in Christ.

But calls to action often descend to the most convenient things – so we’ve heard what sound like hasty, even self-serving apologies without reflection on what we might be apologizing for and more importantly how amends for our actions or inaction might be made. Racial reconciliation is hard work, if much needed, and like anything lasting it will take time.

Statues in the meantime are not faring well – they can come down quickly, and perhaps some of them should, or at least be “repositioned” in places that can give the persons involved context as to their actions and the era in our nation’s history when they lived. Statues are interesting things they have been around forever it seems, and with all due respect to the intentions to honor contributions individuals have made- I have never been as fond of them as pigeons seem to be. They have a tendency to become idols – in point of fact that is precisely what they started out as in the ancient world – witness Paul’s visit to Athens as recorded in Act’s 17, when he visited a place called the Areopagus – in Greek “the hill of Ares” a god of thunder and war.

The place was loaded with statues of gods, and when the Greeks couldn’t think of any more specific gods to honor they covered their bases and erected one – it might have been an altar not a statue - with the inscription “*to an unknown god.*” I am not here saying that all statues are evil or that the current rush, you may even say frenzy, to tear many of them down is wise.

They have their place if nothing else as placeholders in history. But it seems to me that for better, and sometimes for worse, statues represent a longing for the past – even if they honor people who, again, for better or worse were innovators. Many, not all certainly, saw things “as they were” and tried to make them different – those leaders did anything but maintain a slavish devotion to the past. If they had, chances are rather good their likenesses would never have been preserved in marble or bronze.

Jesus was so very much more than an “innovator” but like, albeit in cosmic and eternal ways other famous figures in history, Jesus changed things. That is what our lesson from Matthew today is, in the final analysis about. We need to do a lot of digging to get at that message however, because it is couched in some of Jesus most difficult, stringent words and warnings. There is nothing polished in this address of our Lord, nothing warm and comforting. Jesus comes to a person, by means of the Holy Spirit, and if that heart receives him, as it says in John 1:12 “*to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave them the power to become children of God – born of God.*”

Our Matthew lesson says that if a heart has received Jesus, then allegiances will change. Family is not obliterated by Jesus – there are way too many passages in Scripture that extol the virtues and importance of family and family life, and Jesus is not contradicting them nor could he possibly here have been undoing the 4th Commandment to honor mother and father. But Jesus is saying our highest allegiance, as “children of God born not of flesh but of the Spirit” is God.

And God changes us. The sort of change of which our Lord speaks cannot be limited to a word like “innovation” – it is much more decisive than that. It is total devotion to God things and that, for better or worse, means it will peel a person away from those who are not thus devoted.

It is not the intent of Christ to divide, but it was, he says, the inevitable result of his inhabiting a person’s heart and shaping a person’s mind. This passage, which obviously awakens in us thoughts of the 4th commandment, is really about the 1st commandment – “*I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods.*” This command, the most important Jesus said, creates in this world division because it calls for devotion.

And while we might say, as some of our culture's statues may invite, that faith in God is a call to cling to "the old ways" – read "the better days" – in fact faith in God calls a person to enter spaces both personally and by extension societally we've not entered before.

Some mistakenly think that means "smash any and everything received from a previous generation" but such voices themselves are engaging in deceit – for usually what lies behind such a statement is "*I plan to follow God in my own way.*" Nothing could be further from what Jesus is saying however – following God means "following – not innovating upon." It means allegiance to what he said and did, and the clearest expression of what God said and did is Jesus. That is why he told his first followers, his first disciples "*as the Father sent me – I send you.*" In our lesson today, Jesus even refers to himself as "an apostle of God" –in verse 40 he says, "*whoever welcomes you welcomes me...and the one who sent me.*" That word translated as "sent" is from the Greek "*apostelanta*" – apostle.

And the only "image" that matters to an apostle is the image of the one who sent him, who sends her, into the world as a representation of the sender. These words of our Lord, so stark and stunning, are nonetheless intended to prepare and comfort. Our Christian faith may divide us from those who do not hold that faith, who have not received Christ, for whom the mind and manner of Jesus is inconvenient and off-putting at the very least.

But the passage is also intended to unite us to a Son of Israel, the Son of Man, Jesus, who, again, as John 1:11 said "*came to his own, but his own did not receive him.*" But you have received him, by faith, through grace and the Holy Spirit. So, what does this mean? Well, if I can return to my statue illustration from earlier, receiving Christ means tearing down and replacing the old you – the way I used to be, and learned to like myself.

It means tearing down by the Holy Spirit the old you, the one fashioned by means of your sinful self. It means looking at the person the public, or your family sees and knows, and asking yourself is this really who "the one who sent me into the world" is? Are the folks who welcome me welcoming Jesus, who lives in me, or are they getting a chiseled, polished person who they can abide, heck even honor, but not the man, the woman that was created in Christ Jesus to be.

This passage of our Lord's takes us back to the 1st commandment and asks us to ask ourselves "who am I, and who is my first allegiance to." And if the answer to that question is "*I'm the one Jesus died for – the sinner that only a Savior like Jesus could love*", then you have got yourself pegged perfectly – you're ready to go. You are a child of God – and nothing can separate you from him – truly Jesus says, none of those sorts of folks will ever lose their reward. AMEN