



A Sermon preached by E. Scott Winnette  
July 12, 2020  
**Exodus 20:4-6 & 2 Kings 17:9-11**

21<sup>st</sup> Century Iconoclasts

A much-loved song of British punk rock band, Clash goes, “Should I stay, or should I go now?” Since the murder of Treyvon Martin our country has been singing, “Should they stay, or should they go now?” That is - should the idols, the monuments, the presumed mighty white men on horseback with Civil War sabers and stern visages, should they and the mighty marble pillars upon which they stand high above us all to rule, should they be erased from the public squares? “Should they stay, or should they go now?” Now!

In 2017 two busts were removed from their positions of honor at the entrance of Frederick’s City Hall. On the left was Governor Thomas Johnson and on the right was Chief Justice Robert Brook Taney. Governor Johnson owned several dozen slaves and fought to retain them as property. Justice Taney wrote the decision that declared escaped slave Dred Scott and all slaves non-citizens and therefore unable to sue for their freedom. Taney sought to throttle abolitionists defending the rights of slaveholders.

I was chairing the Historic Preservation Commission and we were charged with making the decision, “Should they stay, or should they go?” On that evening the room was full. Everyone passed the flanking idols of power Taney and Johnson. For hours we listened to public testimony. “But you cannot erase history.” “Leave them and put up some informational panels.” “They shouldn’t be judged poorly; they were products of their generation.”

The most compelling argument to take them down was from a tall African American man. He said he was born to an old Frederick family. His people were in Frederick back in the days of Taney and Johnson. His people were enslaved. It sickened him to pay his water bill. Every time

he needed to pay his water bill in City Hall he had to pass by the judgmental gaze of Taney and the dehumanizing stare of Thomas. Those busts were not put there to tell history. Those busts were intentionally placed before the seat of Frederick City's power to remind everyone of white supremacy.

Our criteria for deciding had to come from historic preservation tenants, not from social justice demands, not from historical education demands, not from white supremacy's demands. I was able to argue they be removed because neither Taney nor Johnson had ever served in that building, had no credible connection. They were moved.

Now, if my role had been as a theologian I would have argued as an iconoclast adhering to monotheisms' steady iconoclastic drumbeat. Moses destroyed the golden calf. Muhammed cleansed Mecca's shrine of idols. In 1 & 2 Kings the rulers were judged by how effectively they "tore down the high places", the sites of false worship. Throughout our Scripture idols, and pillars are prohibited. 10 Commandments, "You shall not make for yourself an idol..." Micah, "and I will cut off your images and your pillars..." Interpreting these texts iconoclasts through history rear up destroying statues and images. The Bildersturm (German term meaning, "image/statue storm") occurred in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. John Calvin even stripped churches of "unseemly representations.

One rationale for monotheists becoming iconoclasts is that the Holy Creator of all things is a jealous God who hates to see other gods worshipped. I don't believe the Holy to be jealous. Rather, I believe God's Spirit of Love, God's Relational Being, God's Connection to all of life abhors when humans erect monuments to themselves, to their ideologies, to maintain their supremacies. We can love art; but I believe a monument especially those at civic centers and other places of power signal that the image represents those with the power.

Confederate statues aren't flagrantly religious, not blatantly sacred but they are manifestly worshipped idols of ideology. These idols on horseback, with sword and uniform don't honor a real life, a real person. They promote a false mythology - white men are by definition the powerful ones, in charge.

The iconoclasts throughout history have most often been violent destroyers of art and beauty. From my perch in history, I prefer they not destroy the idols, but instead move them away from the places of power. Move them away from the Churches, the Synagogues, the Mosques. Historically those religious structures were places of great social power.

Today, if say a Robert E. Lee statue is a real art piece move it to a museum and in the museum contextualize it as a tool to instill fear in African Americans, a tool to promote white supremacy, a tool to re-write history creating heroes of traitors. But if it is simply a copy of a copy of a copy – melt it down and make it a park bench and put on it a plaque that reads, "This was once a statue standing high right here to promote white male power. Renouncing white supremacy, we melted and molded it into this bench. All beloved children are invited to rest here with respect."

Friends, we have work to do. A huge swath of American Christians seek to keep the monuments. With trepidation I compare today's American churches with the churches in Germany during the Nazi regime. There were three camps formed within the German

Evangelical Church. Nazified churches promoted the Nazi agenda and its anti-Semitism. Others declared themselves neutral and their priority was to avoid church schism and conflict with the Nazi state. And there were the Confessing Churches who declared that the church's allegiance was to God and scripture, not a worldly Führer, not to a Nazi idol.

There are plenty of churches who are keeping silent – silence is complicity. We are a Black Lives Matter Church. Like the Confessing Church of Dietrich Bonhoeffer we recognize the terrible truth of racism in our country and we are poised to dismantle it, to melt it down, to reform our society. I don't know of a denomination that has declared an official allegiance to White Power, but the Christians are out there. There are Christians whose vision of the world is a properly ordered home and a properly ordered society with white men at the top. To those who believe in the supremacy of white men there is no more heroic figure than that of a Civil War hero who fought for the Confederacy and tried to preserve a way of life in which white men ruled all.

We must struggle to communicate our prophetic faith. When we are true to its calling, we are part of a fellowship, a society which transcends all frontiers of nation or race or class and challenges head-on the idolatrous claims of racist and nationalist ideology.

Today's Black Lives Matter struggle is not between liberals and conservatives, not between evangelical or progressive Christians, not between Southern and Northern Christians. The battle is between Christians and those who have confused Christian faith with xenophobic, racist, nationalism.

May we be known as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Iconoclasts singing, "they should go now." Let us pray. Holy Love, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amen.