

Statues

Exodus 32:1-8

Center Church, Hartford

September 27, 2020

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After God had done miracles through Moses to free the people from slavery in Egypt, they got impatient. Moses went up a mountain to commune with God, who was giving him a crash course in how to build a new kind of nation, and the people decided they had been deserted. They needed a god like the Egyptians had, one with an image they could see and bring sacrifices to and rely on. So, they asked Moses' brother, Aaron, to make one for them out of some of the booty they had brought away from Egypt. He did. He made a calf, and when the people saw it, they proclaimed "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

Which, of course, was a lie. It was a golden statue of a calf, which, in the ancient middle east at the time, symbolized strength and fertility, which seemed apropos to people trying to rebuild their nation.

I've been thinking about this recently as we talk about statues in this country, and what they represent. I believe that one of the first lies I was told in school was that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Hence, we have cities and streets and schools with his name, oh and lots of statues.

Christopher Columbus did not discover America; any more than a golden calf freed the Hebrew people. It makes it sound as though these two continents, and the islands where Columbus actually landed, were pristine wildernesses with no people. He may have been one of the first Europeans to set foot on the land now known as America, but what he "discovered" were societies which already existed. In fact, he never set foot on North America at all; he was nowhere near most of the places that have his name and his statues today.

The people wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt erected a statue because they preferred an easy lie to a more complicated truth. They erected a statue because they preferred an easy lie to a more complicated truth.

And it is in this context that the first two commandments given to Moses on that mountain had to do with having no god other than God and not creating idols and worshipping them.

Now I know that many times many people might prefer an easy lie to a more complicated truth. I mean, when my elementary school teacher taught me the little poem about 1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue, it would have been a bit problematic for that teacher instead to have had me memorize something about him going on that voyage in order to try to find a shorter way to get to the riches of India, taking people captive who lived on the islands he “discovered,” spreading disease and stealing land and wealth from those people. The truth was much more complicated, so it was easier to sing a little song and visit a statue. As though, in terms of world or American history, this person was so important and wonderful we should build statues and lay flowers and have a whole day as a holiday to celebrate him. Like those people in the desert “rose early and offered burnt offerings and...sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel.” For a golden calf.

God knew well that the problem with statues is that once they are erected, people create stories around them which are often either outright lies or selectively skewed truths. And when those stories are challenged, it is as though the statue has become so holy that those who support it must fight against the challenge, even violently, which seems to be a form of idolatry, yes?

Jacqueline Woodson wrote a wonderful book called *Brown Girl Dreaming* in which she includes these words in a poem about her grandfather talking to her concerning civil rights marches in the mid-20th century.

*More than a hundred years, my grandfather says,
and we're still fighting for the free life
we're supposed to be living.
So there's a war going on in South Carolina
and even as we play
and plant and preach and sleep, we are part of it.
Because you're colored, my grandfather says,
And just as good and bright and beautiful and free
as anybody.
And nobody colored in the South is stopping,
my grandfather says,
until everybody knows what's true.*

The truth can hurt, but it can also set us free, as Jesus said. No golden calf freed the people from slavery in Egypt. Christopher Columbus did not benignly discover America. Robert E. Lee and other military figures from the

Confederate Army were not American heroes; they were traitors, seeking to overturn the government. Why do we have statues and lay wreaths and defend their existence with half-truths and outright lies? Is not this a form of idolatry, against which God gave the first two commandments? The **FIRST TWO!**

Outside this building is a statue of Samuel Stone, the second pastor of this congregation in the 1600's. This church does not own that statue, nor did we erect it. It came here only about 15 years ago to celebrate the partner city relationship with Hertford, England, from which he came. Those who originally brought it here meant to celebrate the ties between the two cities, not necessarily to lift up Stone as a great hero. But there it is, right next to our church, and lots of people assume we own it.

We can tell stories of Samuel Stone that stress his bravery and his standing beside Thomas Hooker to lead the small band that founded our city, and those would be true stories. We can also tell true stories of his involvement with the Connecticut Witch Panic and the massacre of the Pequots. Whatever we do, we need to keep telling the truth and not just the easy, selective truth or even outright lies. We need to do that about all the statues in our cities, and think very carefully before we erect another one. We need to do the same thing when we teach history to our children or ignore uncomfortable histories as adults. Especially as adults we need to work hard to learn what we did not learn as children, those complicated truths rather than simple lies or half-truths.

Center Church will be closed for a holiday in two weeks. In our new Personnel Policy, it is called Indigenous Peoples' Day. A day to remember the fullness of history, and repent. We don't need a statue for that, just some truth. Amen.