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On cornerstones: teaching social justice as a theological value...after #Charlottesville

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I wrote a very thoughtful essay about a week ago on teaching social justice as a theological value. It centered on a chance meeting my spouse and I had with the CEO and Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity of Westchester, Jim Killoran. In that piece, I wanted to make a connection between social justice and faith-in-action as I witnessed in Jim's life and work, in what Habitat's founder Millard Fuller called the "theology of the hammer." It drew parallels with the origins of Habitat, to the life of Jesus as carpenter/builder, to the need for all of us as human beings to create shelter and sanctuary for one another, and our responsibility as educators to engage "pedagogies of the hammer" as a theological value.

It was a thought provoking essay, if I do say so myself. And then Charlottesville happened.

Every lovely, poetic turn of phrase that I articulated in that piece seemed meaningless in the wake of the violence unleashed in Charlottesville, VA this past weekend. As others have noted so poignantly, those who say "this is not who we are" are woefully misguided.[1] The hatred and violence of white supremacy, white nationalism, the alt-right, the KKK and Neo-Nazis have

been with us for a very long time. They are part of the fabric of our country's history and their legacy continues to drive our policies and practices. The fact that those who espouse this hateful ideology are now emboldened to show their faces - no more hiding behind a hood or an internet persona - at this moment in history is a reflection of where we've come as a country. In spite of the tremendous effort of many to build a beloved community where all are afforded their God-given right of human dignity, we have fallen far short.

How do we, as theological educators, teach social justice as a theological value at this particular moment in our country and our world? I'm stumped by that question, to tell you the God-honest truth. In the midst of the images of torches and swastikas, of confederate statues and flags, my mind keeps going back, strangely, to a song by Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Corner Stone," in which he paraphrases the biblical passage, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." [2] While Marley applies multiple meanings to the "builder" and the "stone", including the lover pleading for acceptance, the central message is consistent with the biblical interpretation: that which society refuses to accept as valuable can be, in fact, the foundation upon which our most essential values are constructed.

If we accept this interpretation, can social justice be understood as the theological value which becomes the cornerstone for the future we wish to build together, where the dignity and integrity of all creation - including our planet - is valued and given the opportunity to flourish?

I would like to believe in that possibility. Charlottesville - as well as the mosque bombing in Minnesota, the killings of so many Black women and men at the hands of the state, and the rounding up of undocumented persons, among so many other atrocities of late - challenge my belief at its core. It is just so overwhelming; I feel it deep in my bones and I hear the same from many of my students. I shudder to think about how I will need to teach from that place as a new semester begins in just a few days from now.

And yet, there's something about the process of building - of laying a foundation, with stones and cornerstones, and seeing something emerge from the ground up - that is instructive for us in this moment. Every new structure requires time, a plan for construction and a purpose for use. In rudimentary terms, it begins with clearing and preparing a space: from ensuring the ground is suitable, to assessing the impact on the surrounding landscape, to removing old foundations. Once the new foundation is laid, then the structure is assembled: wood, steel, nail and mortar. Load bearing walls need to be accounted for; windows and doors need to be thoughtfully placed. The design needs to resonate with the intention for functionality, for how the space will be used. Those creating this new structure may not have a clear picture of exactly what it will look like, or how it will interact with the structures around it, until it is near completion. To some extent, a certain degree of faith is required that those who developed the plan have taken every possible consideration into account.

Before we glorify this lovely metaphor of building upon a strong foundation, we should be reminded that it was used as a powerful call to arms over 156 years ago by Alexander H. Stevens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America, and well-noted in his

“Cornerstone Speech” given in Savannah, Georgia on March 21, 1861. In this address, Stephens claimed that the foundation upon which the United States was established, including the constitution that articulates that founding, “rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the ‘storm came and the wind blew.’”[3]

In contrast, the Confederacy was based on a wholly different premise: “Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery - subordination to the superior race - is his natural and normal condition...This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”[4]

This is our history as a nation. These are the cornerstones that have been unearthed, these are the structures emerging from the shadows, as violent backlash against those of us who believe unequivocally that all persons are made in the image of God are laying new foundations upon which structures of human flourishing can be shaped. Among the backlash are some who want to enshrine those cornerstones and structures – including statues of this Confederacy – as idols of worship for the next generation.

If we, as theological educators, envision structures of human flourishing that are established upon foundations of justice, then I think we need to get our hands dirty to clear a space for them to be built. Maybe, if we want to teach social justice as a theological value, we will first need to make time to gather in community to plan for construction and a purpose for use. Maybe we need to get out of the classroom and into the community, pick up some tools and start unearthing those cornerstones that have upheld structures – our judicial system, our corporate boardrooms and, yes, our educational institutions – that have undermined the dignity and integrity of too many for too long. Otherwise, we run the deadly risk of building new structures upon the same foundations so resoundingly applauded in Stephens’ speech a century and a half ago.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. That which is deemed as possessing less value in our society, that which matters less to the world, becomes the foundation for new ways of being in relation. This is the precisely the gift of the Gospel message, of Jesus’ incarnation from a place where nothing good comes. We are called to discern, for ourselves and with our students in the aftermath of Charlottesville, what stones we will reject and which will become the theological basis for our shared future.

[1] David Potter, “White Supremacy vs. the Gospel in Charlottesville,” *Sojourners*, August 15, 2017.

[2] Psalm 118:22; Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7

[3] (Link No Longer Available)

[4] Ibid.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/08/cornerstones-teaching-social-justice-theological-valueafter-charlottesville/>