

For the Journey

June 25/20 – Rev. Dave Crawford



Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) was a rather average person prior to the American Civil War (1861-65). The son of an Ohio tanner, he was always somewhat introverted but had a natural gift with, and love of, horses. Grant finished in the middle of his class as a Westpoint graduate and soon afterward left the army for civilian life. With a small family depending on him, in his 20s and 30s Grant failed at farming, bill collecting, real estate, and selling firewood. He eventually found modest success as a clerk in his father's harness shop. After the outbreak of civil war in 1861 Grant returned to the army and found his true calling! As a military strategist and leader of Union forces Grant excelled. Following numerous military successes, most notably at Vicksburg, Mississippi, President Lincoln appointed Grant Commanding General of the entire Army of the Potomac, in charge of 530,000 men. He became a highly respected general in the fight for the Union and against slavery, and was largely responsible for the defeat of Confederate forces. In 1868 he was elected President of the United States and fulfilled a mandate of continuing to suppress slavery in the South and rebuild the nation (Reconstruction) and the hopes of a "new birth of freedom" (Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address). U.S. Grant also owned one slave for about a year, 1858-59, whose name was Bill, given to him by his father-in-law. Yet ultimately disgusted by slavery, Grant freed the man of his own accord.

The somewhat sketchy facts related to the last two sentences of the previous paragraph are the only matters of interest to the now conveniently masked hordes of strident, mostly under-30, mostly white, unrelenting, often uninformed “justice” seekers hauling down statues across the West, including monuments to Sir Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Columbus, George Washington, and Ulysses S. Grant.

The recent brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA, was certainly a turning point in American society, a nation which arguably heretofore hasn’t dealt justly with its racial issues going back centuries but most significantly leading up to and including the US Civil War. In 1860 more than 4 million black Americans were slaves in the South, between 12 and 15 % of the total US population (sadly in Canada, or what would eventually be known as Canada, 1400 black people between 1670 and 1834 lived as slaves). Yet while the peaceful BLM protests in the immediate days and weeks following George’s Floyd’s death were impressive and prophetic, even hopeful, perhaps the increased rhetoric and violent, anarchist fallout since those days has taken some liberal democracies into dangerous territory, as various “movements” and causes have rallied under the BLM banner, in some ways perverting its admirable core.

Respected American documentary filmmaker Ken Burns has this week declared his support for BLM and suggested that America is going through a societal “reckoning” that is just and very necessary. He has demanded, and rightly so, that all Confederate statues, monuments, and U.S. military base names (many named after Confederate generals), be removed as soon as possible, and permanently. Burns also reminded American citizens that for all his faults, Confederate General Robert E. Lee (whom Lincoln asked to lead the Union forces by the way), advised in 1869 that there should be no statues to the Confederate cause ever erected, since it would be hurtful to so many in that era and in the future. Yet Burns and other Americans have urged that while new demands for societal transformation are necessary, wholesale destruction of that nation’s complex history through what’s often called “cancel culture” morality may be unhelpful in the long term. Challenging times to say the least!

The changes of our era, the challenges before us, perhaps require thoughtfulness as much as they call for action. There was a time when the vagaries of human nature and our shared imperfection, our brokenness, our capacity for both good and evil, were generally recognized. Even if the Christian Church’s influence in society was in gradual decline in the second half of the last century, nonetheless the residual presence of Christian ideals in the public realm was pervasive, guiding morality and beliefs around human nature and history.

Yet for Christians even now aren't we called to remember that faith-based perspective on human nature in our evaluation of history, and particularly now to speak of that perspective in the face of cancel culture's erratic judgments?

Does the imperfection of Ulysses S. Grant discount all the good he achieved? Should all statues of Churchill be removed because he erred in some respects? What we learn from the Christian story is how a God of Love looks upon the complexity of all human lives, the good and the not-so-good, and despite this sometimes troubling complexity chooses to embrace us in our flawed status, each one of us. It's called grace, and it's still amazing, still transformational!

Black Lives Matter is an important element of the "reckoning" Ken Burns has identified as relevant for American society, but can't we discuss issues of racism, areas of concern, steps to be taken, without having to embrace the narrow ideology of cancel culture, without having to take a knee or speak the term systemic racism or support any action taken by groups claiming to be representing BLM but likely not?

Last week Michael Korenberg, now former Chair of the Board of Governors at U.B.C., quickly offered his resignation after it was discovered he had liked a couple of Tweets that challenged the rhetoric of some BLM self-appointed spokespersons. It appears he was forced out by the powers that be. This is atrocious. Surely we're meant for better ways of disagreeing than erasure of a career. Surely we're actually capable of grappling with the complexity of our human condition in discerning the path forward. Surely we Christians are called to model a more thoughtful, helpful way of dealing with matters of racial justice and fairness.

Grace and Peace

Dave

“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” (Romans 3:23)