

The Study of Memorials

Across our nation from town squares to courthouse lawns to national, county and city parks we have statues made of marble and granite. They are made to last for decades if not centuries. When my wife and I were at West Point, the United States Military Academy, we were impressed with the statues of famous Americans, most of whom were graduates who left their mark on the country and the world. We saw the statues of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, George S. Patton, John Sedgwick and Sylvanus Thayer. Of course there was a statue of George Washington, the first commander and chief of the forces of the American cause in the Revolutionary War. These are only a few of the tributes we saw.

Symbolism is ubiquitous at West Point. One of the unique statements in the erection of monuments is the desired unity of our country, even after surviving one of the bloodiest civil wars of any nation. West Point produced 445 Civil War Generals; 294 fought for the Union and 151 for the Confederacy. And yet through the four years as a divided country, friendships remained intact for many of those young men who attended West Point. One of the most touching had to be the enduring friendship between General Lewis Addison Armistead and General Winfield Scott Hancock who were good friends for 17 years. Although both attended West Point at different times they became fast friends by both being assigned to the U.S. 6th Infantry. At the outset of the war, Hancock took sides with his home state of Pennsylvania and Armistead took sides with his home state of North Carolina. Their decisions did not cause bitter feelings between them and they planned before leaving each other's company to see each other again after the war. Both were wounded during Pickett's Charge during the last day of the Battle of Gettysburg. They were taken to separate places for medical treatment. Armistead died on July 5, 1863 from his wounds, and before his death he had arranged that his Bible be delivered to Hancock's wife in the case of his death. Hancock survived his wounds, but they caused problems for him throughout the rest of his life.

Past the main entrance of Thayer Gate stands the Lee Barracks, named for that most famous of the Confederate generals and the school's former superintendent, Robert E. Lee. Across the way, Reconciliation Plaza Memorial features a granite sculpture of Lee's head. Past that, Jefferson Hall prominently displays a nearly 6-foot-tall painting of the Confederate commander.

After a long time coming, a seven-and-half foot bronze statue of Ulysses S. Grant now stands at the U.S. Military Academy, the dedication ceremony recently taking place on the West Point Plain on April 25, 2019. Grant was the commanding general who was responsible for the defeat of Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia and ultimately the ending of the Confederate States and preservation of the Union. Almost in an act of national appreciation he was elected as the 18th president of the United States.

I. WE MAKE MEMORIALS TO REMEMBER OUR PAST.

On this Memorial Day, it is well that we remember that freedom is not free. One of the famous memorials in America has to be the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, now often referred to as the Tomb of the Unknowns, commemorating the unidentified and often forgotten military personnel who died honorably for our country. Across the land people will gather together, not just to have a picnic, but also to remember and give thanks for those who paid the ultimate price for freedom. Many Americans will remember their loved ones and friends who died in service of their country.

We would do well to remember that God erected a hall of fame in Hebrews 11 to those who were faithful and kept the faith. Hebrews 11:33, 34 says that these heroes were those, “Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.” Yet in this same chapter we read that these heroes were mocked, scourged, locked in bonds, imprisoned, sawn in half, killed with the sword, destitute and tormented (Hebrews 11:36, 37). Subsequently, the Bible says in Hebrews 11:38 that these were those “Of whom the world was not worthy....” Going back to Hebrews 11:35, we read, “...others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.” When given a choice to live a compromised life and turn their back on God, they chose death. God is encouraging us to remember. Let us this day remember the faith and the faithful.

II. WE MAKE MEMORIALS TO COMMEMORATE THE GOOD OF THE PAST.

Recently, we were in a doctor's office and we saw his graduation diploma declaring in Latin his graduation from Yale University. Perhaps the most cherished certificates that hang on my wall and congratulatory artifacts on my desk are those I received on my 25th and 30th anniversary as pastor of Christchurch Baptist Fellowship. Even more precious than my diplomas and honorary degrees is our marriage license. These were great events. Events we need to remember.

Jacob and Laban, after years of hurt and accusation, made a stone monument to commemorate the mending of broken lives and the cementing of their friendship. Genesis 31:48, 49: “And Laban said, This heap *is* a witness between me and thee this day. Therefore was the name of it called Galeed; And Mizpah; for he said, The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another.” Proverbs 27:10a: “Thine own friend, and thy father's friend, forsake not....” Don't forget those who love you. Don't forget those who challenged you to be more and do more with your life.

III. WE MAKE MEMORIALS TO LEARN FROM THE HARD AND HURTING EXPERIENCES OF THE PAST.

Psalms 119:71 says, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.” It is through painful experiences that we often learn life's most important lessons.

Returning to the memorials at West Point, allow me to bring you into some of our recent history: Chris Carola of The Associated Press wrote, "The growing national effort to remove monuments or honors to Robert E. Lee and other leading figures of the Confederacy has reached the U.S. Military Academy. If two members of Congress from New York get their way, his name will be removed from Lee Barracks."

It may not be long before we have an uprising against the new memorial for U.S. Grant's statue. Peter Cozzens wrote in the Smithsonian Magazine, November 2016, "Four documents, held at the Library of Congress and the United States Military Academy Library, leave no doubt: The Grant administration launched an illegal war and then lied to Congress and the American people about it. More recent Grant biographers have worked hard to rehabilitate his presidency, and they have generally extolled his treatment of Indians. But they have either misinterpreted the beginnings of the Lakota war or ignored them altogether, making it appear that Grant was blameless in the greatest single Indian war waged in the West."

All great men are still men at best. And we all have "feet of clay." The Bible says in Jeremiah 5:5, "I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the LORD...." Job 32:9: "Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment." Let us take from the good and righteous decisions and actions of those who have gone before us and learn from the dark moments of great men's lives.

Psalm 119:99: "I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies *are* my meditation." The Lord Jesus was the only perfect person to have walked on this earth. Let us supremely follow Him and only follow others as they follow Him, but no further.

-Pastor Pope-