

Sermon: "Under a Monument's Shadow"**Scripture: Isaiah 1:10-20****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 20, 2022**

I have to say I was troubled preparing for this sermon and I'll give you fair warning that if I preach it well you should be troubled by the end of it too. It all begins with a podcast I was listening to that stopped me in my tracks when the person being interviewed out of the blue talked about my home church in Richmond, VA, the place I grew up, the church where I went to Sunday morning worship, Sunday night prayer service, Wednesday youth choir, weekend youth group, good ole First Baptist Church Richmond, VA.

I was listening to Jim Wallace's "Soul of a Nation" podcast as he interviewed Robert P. Jones the CEO and founder of Public Religion Research Institute and they were talking about the link in this country between Christian supremacy – that there is something inherently superior in being Christian - and white supremacy – that there is something inherently superior in being white. Jones mentioned that as he was doing research in Richmond for his latest book, he was learning about the confederate monuments on Monument Ave that were raised between 1890 and 1930, statues of confederate leaders that me and my family drove by and under every week to get to church. These were statues raised at the turn of the 20th century not as an honest reflection of history so much as a public display some 50 years after the civil war and after decades of reconstruction to publicly remind all of white political and social supremacy.

That wasn't news to me and when Tracy and I went back to visit my family there last year we went with my parents and sisters to the Robert E Lee statue -

before it was removed - and saw the powerful graffiti on it and the display of stories of black people brutalized or killed by the police. There were a lot them.

But what gave me pause was when Robert Jones explained that after the confederate monuments were built on Monument Ave about 7 of the most prominent white churches that were originally located further in downtown Richmond relocated their buildings to be in the shadows of these monuments. I immediately got on-line and looked up the history of my childhood church and what do you know? Not something I learned in Sunday School - originally the church was downtown on East Broad and 12th Street and not long after those monuments were built - in 1938 - First Baptist Church up and moved to Monument Ave to be under the shadow not of Christ on the cross but of Stonewall Jackson on his horse. I was somewhat shook as I caught a glimpse of my white Christian Baptist church, that great edifice sitting there on the corner of Monument Ave and Boulevard under the shadow of Stonewall Jackson and in its history aligning itself with a worldview that said a confederate regime that fought for the right to own, use, and sell black people as property, was consistent with its Christian values.

I'm not saying the people who worship there now say that, in fact when the monument was taken down this past year, the pastor there and some parishioners were handing out water bottles and celebrating the dismantling of the statue, which I was heartened to hear. And even when I was growing up in the church we had a relationship with the black Baptist church nearby and would occasionally worship with one another... which is all good and well but I have to say water bottles and friendly church exchanges, making sandwiches together at the local soup kitchen, isn't going to cut through that kind of a history, that kind

of corporate sin, that kind of distortion of Christianity that gives preference to whiteness, that abuses and exploits blackness, and that stays safely segregated in neighborhoods of privilege while remaining silent to the ways that our racist past has ongoing implications in our society today.

How in the world could the religion that places the humble and self-sacrificing Jesus, the Lord who refused to “lord over” anyone and condemned in no uncertain terms those who did, how in the world did our white Christian slave-owning forebears figure out how to take this religion and justify the enslavement and brutalization of others? And how have we as white Christians, in the north and south, cause we all know racism is not just a southern problem, how have we never really reckoned with it.

White supremacy in our country valuing white lives over black lives and making enslavement of blacks possible didn't just happen despite our Christian religion, it was somehow an outgrowth of our Christian religion – not of Christ but the religion. The writer Drew Hart in his book “Who Will Be a Witness” outlines how this came to be saying that Christian supremacy can be traced back to the time when Christianity ceased to be a minority marginalized sect and was married through Constantine to the purposes of the state in the 4th century. It caught flame in late medieval Europe when the pope at the time established Terra Nullius which stated that any land occupied by non-Christians was deemed empty land and could be seized through war by Christians, establishing this binary of Christian on this side and heathens on the other which then led to 3 centuries of Christians carrying the cross of Jesus into battle to destroy the bodies and acquire the land of Muslims.

Eventually came the divine stamp of approval given by the church for the Western conquest of lands and the settling of the “new world” exemplified in the figure of Christopher Columbus who wrote in his journal as he first discovered the new land – “We can subjugate all the peoples here and make them do whatever we want!” – and so came the slaughter and removal of the indigenous population in this country quickly followed by the enslavement of African people to work in the English colonies all supported and enabled by white Christian churches and pastors who taught that Christianity and the claiming of the Americas and slavery were not in fact incompatible with Christianity but the way God intended it all to be. This brilliantly diabolical twisting of Christian theology, this capacity for self-justification to believe they were devout Christians despite their treatment of people of color, as Isabel Wilkerson explains in her book “Caste” was so impressive and so effective that it led to one Adolph Hitler a couple hundred years later to study how the Americans could possibly have pulled off such a feat so he could replicate in his own country.

Drew Hart explains frankly that “the practice of Western Christian supremacy over society gave birth to white supremacy and the two functioned as two hands within the same body... their mangled and white supremacist theology justified it all as.... divinely ordained by God.” (p.128). He says “The church has been at the center and the forefront of this global scandal.” And then if we jump forward to this present day and all that’s been happening over the past few years of public conscience raising about systemic racism in our country, it’s worth stopping and noting how for the most part white Christian churches remain on the sidelines.

There's been this public acknowledgement of such systemic injustices that maintain racial inequities: protests have erupted, monuments have been removed, the NFL has football helmets with "end racism" on them, there are psas about black history month on various channels all instead of a commercials and... where is the church? Overall it's pretty silent, which suggests to me that Drew Hart's assessment and explanation that the white Christian church has not only allowed white supremacy but fostered it, seems pretty convincing. The church of my upbringing, First Baptist, no longer sits on the corner of Monument Ave and Boulevard under the shadow of Stonewall Jackson but First Baptist sits on Monument Ave and Arthur Ash Boulevard, the city recognized a black tennis star who was also a great advocate for those suffering with HIV, and the city removed the confederate statues and all of this not because of First Baptist there on the corner but despite them.

Robert P. Jones' organization – Public Religion Research Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, organization dedicated to conducting independent research, conducted a study of religion in American that came to a disturbing conclusion. Robert Jones, a southern Christian himself described the results - "If you take your average white American, and you add Christian identity, they move up the racism index not down." White people, they said their study revealed, are more likely to hold racist views if they are Christian than if they are unaffiliated.

Do you hear what that is saying? That white supremacy is so deep in our history and enmeshed in white American Christianity – north or south - that if it's not overt then there's some kind of unconscious transmission of white supremacist views that are carried along in our American faith tradition. Are you troubled yet?

That's a lot to lay on you this morning and my job as a preacher is not to give you a history lesson but to help illuminate the Bible in hopes that you might catch a glimpse of God's truth for your life. So let me begin drawing this sermon to a close by tethering what this history lesson on Christian and white supremacy has to do with what we are taught in the sacred word.

1. A tough-love critique of one's own tradition, country, people, is what the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus himself were in the business of - raising their voices to proclaim and complain about how Israel, God's chosen people, God's own nation, were falling from grace and distorting God's dream for them. The Jews gave the world the gift of self-critique and self-analysis. They understood that there is an external standard to which we are held, namely God's standard, and that we are accountable to that and must challenge ourselves if we fall short. To look squarely at the white Christian church's role in racism and the exploitation of others is being faithful to the biblical prophetic tradition.
2. To state the obvious, those standards that God expects of us, according to the prophets and Jesus himself, are at utter odds with a mindset of Christian supremacy and white supremacy. The standard we are measured by requires us to eschew any lording over and instead has to do with how we treat the least, the lost, the last, the oppressed of society – "I hate your solemn assemblies," Isaiah has God saying, "wash yourself clean, remove your evil doing, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed." Jesus says the last will be first, the lost found, the least made to be greatest.

3. The prophets and Jesus himself highlighted societal transformation more than personal salvation. Could it be - and this is something that Jones hits hard in his book called "White Too Long" - could it be that the American Christian emphasis upon the individual relationship with God and the personal savior of Jesus is something of a smokescreen to avoid applying our faith to larger societal issues? Martin Luther King in his Letter in a Birmingham Jail names it squarely when he's mystified by the churches around him sitting on the sidelines of the civil rights movement and writes "Who are these white Christians sitting safely behind their anesthetizing stained glass windows?" Focusing exclusively on a very personal salvation is a distortion of biblical teaching and dulls our moral conscience. The equivalent of this, I would suggest, in our more progressive Christian churches is the claim that social justice is too political for church and that we should stay focused on spirituality.
4. Finally, as we move towards Lent in a couple of weeks, we highlight the role of confession and repentance in the biblical narrative, that confession, repentance, forgiveness is a central monumental avenue to God. An honest reckoning of our history and how we have been complicit in white dominance and supremacy is appropriate if we want to follow Jesus as white American Christians. What is the history of our particular church as it relates to racial issues here in the greater Boston area? Shouldn't we ask? Did our founding families have slaves? Were they a part of how Winchester became exclusively white and wealthy? If centuries of policy have advantaged white people and economically plundered black people, then shouldn't the white Christian church

consider how to make right such historical wrongs, wouldn't Jesus expect us like Zaccheus to make amends for our participation in the economic exploitation of others?

After Easter I believe our Racial Justice Task Force (RJTF) – Jerry, Anne, Sarah, Kaye, Jonathan, Julianne - are going to invite us to do some studying and considering of our white Christian privilege and what that means for us as a church. I hope you'll consider challenging yourself and joining us.

In a society with too much disinformation and lies, a society that seems to encourage denial or avoidance of inconvenient or painful truths, a society that still has SO FAR to go to realize a just society, the biblical call to truth seeking and justice making is critical and the honest engagement with such work will yield blessing – “give and it will be given to you,” Jesus says, “a good measure pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap. For the measure you use will be measured to you.”

And I thank Jenn Richter for offering this response to my sermon and in honor of black history month....

Rev. Will Burhans' sermon relied heavily on these two sources:

1. Drew G.I. Hart, *Who Will Be a Witness? Igniting Activism for God's Justice, Love and Deliverance* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press), 2020
2. Jim Wallace, *The Soul of a Nation Podcast*, “*White Too Long: How Racism Lives in the DNA of White Christianity in America*” interview with Robert P. Jones, July 23, 2020