INTERFAITH INSIGHT

What should we do with controversial monuments?

A reader's response offers a different perspective on our nation's memorials

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What do we do with controversial monuments? In last week's Insight I looked at the differences between statues, monuments and idols. They might look the same if you just look at the physical presence, but in different contexts and for different communities they might become something quite different.

For example, Grand Rapids has its own Civil War Monument located on a small triangular plot near the intersection of Division and Monroe Center. The 34-foot monument depicts a Union soldier mounted on a base with detail including flags, eagles, portraits of Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant and others, as well as the state seal and a panel showing a woman helping a wounded soldier.

Nearby is Veterans Memorial Park, originally dedicated in 1926 to honor the veterans of World War I. Since then, additions have been made honoring those who served in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. In recent years, many more statues have been placed around the city recognizing people in our community's history who have made significant contributions to our life and development.

A relatively recently added statue depicts the Native American Chief Noonday, who welcomed early settlers to the area. Other additions include Bishop Baraga, an early Christian figure in the city's history. Lyman Parks, Grand Rapids' first African American mayor, has a statue in front of Grand Rapids City Hall. A statue of Grand Rapids-born Senator Arthur Vandenberg honors a man instrumental in the creation of the United Nations after World War II.

A statue depicting Rosa Parks standing at the bus seat she refused to give up is now located near Rosa Parks Circle in downtown Grand Rapids.

Near the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, we find statues of the president as well as his wife, Betty. North of the museum there is a statue of Nishnabe Gemaw, an early Native American leader. It was commissioned by a committee of elders from the Odawa, Ojibwa and Potawatomi tribes.

All of these statues are here to honor and remember our history and, to my knowledge, have not taken on controversial or political meaning. They have not become "memorials" that verge on the sacred. They are not in danger of becoming idols.

A RESPONSE TO LAST WEEK'S COLUMN

I received a response to last week's column from a college classmate with whom I have maintained a friendship. He reads the column from his home in western New York State and has perspective a bit different, having served 14 years on the American Battle Monuments Commission. He was appointed to the commission by presidents Clinton and Obama.

Rolly Kidder attended seminary in the Chicago area, as did I, following college graduation. He served on the Chautauqua County Legislature and then for eight years on the New York State Assembly. With his permission I have included his response, although I would probably not be so generous regarding the Confederate monuments to generals who sought to destroy our country and that were erected during the Jim Crow era:

"I served on the American Battle Monuments Commission which is responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the overseas cemeteries for America's war dead including the memorial art in these places. I also was on the Site and Design Committee for the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.

"In my view, public monuments and memorials, in general, represent a time, an era and a history. Because times and views change, does not mean that we should tear down or replace memorial art which, when it was constructed, reflected where the country stood. For example, in all of our World War I and World War II overseas cemeteries the grave markers are either Christian crosses or Stars of David. When you stand at Normandy on Omaha Beach and look at the graves, you see this forest of markers symbolizing common sacrifice and bravery. You don't even think of them as being religious symbols.

"In these same cemeteries, chapels were built with stained glass windows in the style of a small Christian church. They were installed as places for the next-of-kin to pray. Should they now be destroyed because our country has become more secular and multicultural? I would say 'No!' Perhaps add symbolism to them but, in general, leave them alone. They represented what was acceptable and meaningful at the time they were built.

"The same can be said of what has been built on our National Mall, America's 'village green.' Washington and Jefferson owned slaves. Yet, one led the nation in establishing our country as a republic and democracy; and the other authored the words 'all men are created equal,' which would eventually lead to the freeing of the slaves. These men were not perfect but the underlying principles for which they stood were enduring and gave us the country we now have.

"I would agree that there are Confederate monuments in the Southern states which today we may find objectionable. However, there are also probably too many circles in Washington, D.C., which surround sculptures of generals riding horses, who were memorialized to remind us of who won the Civil War.

A crowd, including Bianca Vargas, of Grand Rapids, gathers for a ceremony of remembrance Nov. 11 at Veterans Memorial Park after the annual Veterans Day Parade in downtown Grand Rapids. *MLive.com files*

"If we think we can erase American history or change social behavior by removing monuments and memorials — we are going down a dead-end. Martin Luther King kept his eye on what would help African Americans during his time and that was the Civil Rights Act. He didn't waste a lot of time trying to tear down Confederate monuments.

"And, fittingly, when a subsequent generation decided to remember King, they didn't tear down the Jefferson Memorial. They built a memorial to King, straight across the tidal basin from Jefferson where the two could look each other in the eye, each with his own words engraved in stone about what freedom and liberty should mean for the citizens of this country.

"That is the way to deal with Memorials — build new ones to show how the country can grow, change and embrace equality under the law for all of its citizens."

I appreciate the sentiments expressed by Kidder and certainly hope that whatever the disposition of such statues and monuments, that it be handled not by angry mob violence, but by careful consideration by the appropriate representatives from our communities. No statue or monument should be an idol. So our faith traditions have warned us, and we must take heed.

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August 15, 2020 10:02 am (GMT -4:00)
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