

Saints preserve us

Thursday, May 28, 2009

I've been thinking about ancestor worship lately. A friend of mine is a member of the design committee for a monument being erected downtown in honor of one of Greenville's more notable mayors, Max Heller. I don't know what form the memorial will take (and it is rather odd that Heller isn't even dead yet), but its neighbors on Main Street will include baseball legend "Shoeless Joe" Jackson, scientist Charles Townes (who invented the laser), builder Vardry McBee (considered by some to be the "Father of Greenville") and Antebellum statesman Joel Poinsett. His statue is erected on the site where, on July 4, 1851, just a few months before his death, he delivered a speech in favor of preserving the Union. This nod to non-belligerence I group together with the Sterling High School monument honoring Greenville County's first black high school. Both seem to me to be forms of apology endemic to the "progressive South." But more on that later.



What does this little bronze venerate? And what purpose does that veneration serve?

Today Greenville is a prosperous city, confident at times to the point of arrogance, but I was reminded recently that Sherman ignored it altogether during his March to the Sea, I suppose because it was of no strategic importance to the Union. Serious injury was added to that insult a century later when the textile industry shipped its operations overseas, a dreary trend that fueled Greenville's slow spiral down the drain of history where so much of Dixie disappeared during the 1970's. Enter Max Heller. During two terms as mayor (1971-79), he set in motion events that would make Greenville one of the most happily ended downtown revitalization stories in the country.

So there's no doubt at all that Heller, like Townes, McBee and Poinsett are all men worthy of recognition, but to what end? With what motivation? Living in Columbia, the state capitol, for over 25 years, I had many opportunities to ponder the graven images of folks like Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond, not to mention the infamous Confederate memorial that fronts our seat of government like a big, angry penis. I've never believed that any of the monuments are or were as much about the people depicted as they are expressions of defiance in the face of defeat. Parting shots and rallying cries. Means to ends as varied as the people who commission them.

Last night I logged onto hulu.com to watch "Firefly," a sci-fi series part Buck Rogers, part Roy Rogers, part Swiss Family Robinson. In the episode "Jaynestown" (season 1, number 7), Jayne Cobb, the most disagreeable member of the ship's crew, discovers that he's become a folk hero on a planet he'd fled years before after a bungled heist. He'd dropped the money he'd stolen because his pursuers were gaining ground and his damaged ship was losing altitude. Only when he returns to the planet does he discover that the money had landed where the poor most needed it and where the rich couldn't recover it ... and it was in that way that he'd become a local hero. Flattered at first, Jayne later rebukes his followers when he realizes how unworthy he is of the myth they've made of him. At the end of the episode, Jayne's captain consoles him in epilogue, saying, "It's my estimation that every man ever had a statue made of him was one kind of sombitch or other. It isn't about you, Jayne. It's about what they need."

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And that's what got me thinking about the very pragmatic impulses we swaddle in sentimentality and call public art. Snubbed by Sherman in the 1870's and jilted by King Cotton in the 1970's, Greenville, poor Greenville, turned to its ancestors for self-esteem and unconditional love. Ancestors, being dead, will say whatever we want them to say and their statues don't run off to China when the price of domestic bronze becomes unaffordable.

The Church of the Holy Ancestor builds monuments that serve both as places of communion and points of sale. The Heller memorial sells Greenville. It builds brand. It legitimizes. And Heller, a Holocaust survivor first elected to Greenville's City Council back when there were such things around here as "good Jews" and "bad Jews," could be more sanctifying for such a town such as this only if he were black. But Greenville native Jesse Jackson will pass on eventually and I predict that his statue will make the Colossus of Rhodes look anemic by comparison. Southern guilt, like Southern pride, runs as deep and dark as the abyss.

No doubt many a nostalgic tear will be shed when Max Heller the man mounts the podium today (yes, this very day) as his memorial is unveiled, but something tells me he'll know that he's not the god in the machine he helped refurbish. He'll know that he is, to quote the burglar's captain, just "one kind of sombitch or other" on whose public face economic development professionals will perform plastic surgery as needed in perpetuity. And that, so far as I'm concerned, may be his or any other hero's greatest contribution to the general welfare. With all due respect to his earthly accomplishments – and I do acknowledge them, Saint Heller, like Saints Jackson, McBee, Townes and all the other saints, ultimately will have preserved us not through any efforts of theirs, but through our own efforts, undertaken in their name.

Length: 7:53

Music: *Precious Memories* by The Stanley Brothers, *Let's Go Home* by The Staple Singers, *He Will Set Your Fields On Fire* by Reno & Smiley, *Dominique* by Soeur Marie

Writer, voice: Tim Brosnan