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When traditions oppose

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

Beside the Interstate to Nashville, a statue of Lt. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest was unveiled on July 11. It has stirred controversy. General Forrest was hero to some, archvillain to others. A fierce Confederate soldier, he embodied courage and leadership. Yet he was a slave trader before the Civil War and the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan afterward. Did he have a change of heart when he freed his own slaves before the war's end, or when he resigned from the Klan, denouncing its growing violence?

Somehow this memorial to the Confederacy and to its ideals seems oddly out of place in the New South. To me it is a reminder. Class distinction, pride, and tradition are mental influences still to be addressed.

Christ Jesus faced similar entrenched opinions. The Pharisees cloaked their intolerance and racism in religious practice. Those who failed to observe certain established rituals and traditions were scorned. Jesus challenged their forms of worship. He taught that one gains the kingdom of heaven through transformation of the inward spirit rather than outward observances.

But Jesus did more than dispute ritualistic traditions. He taught that salvation was individual, not group. Inspired prophets had begun to catch glimpses of this. Ezekiel told the children of Israel: "What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel" (18:2, 3). He continued to say that each one who lived justly would surely be blessed by God.

Jesus would later fully reveal the individual, inward nature of salvation; that regardless of what others say or do, it is based on individual transformation. As he told the Pharisee Nicodemus, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). However, Nicodemus may have been

unwilling to risk the disapproval of family and friends, choosing instead to return to familiar, comfortable forms of worship.

The disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, sought the individual spiritual transformation he taught. On at least one occasion, they wondered if the sacrifice was worth it. Speaking for the others, Peter asked, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" Jesus replied, "Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life" (Matt. 19:27, 29).

Following Christ meant breaking with religious and family tradition. The woman who discovered Christian Science found the same to be true in her era. Practicing Christ's method of healing disease and sin - through reliance on God alone - brought Mary Baker Eddy criticism from family and persecution from clergy. Yet her conviction of the truth of what divine Love was revealing to her, and of God's power to heal and save, upheld her.

So it is today. When one discovers that the Christ heals now just as in Jesus' time, and begins to search the Scriptures for their spiritual meaning, inspiration, and instruction, he or she may encounter resistance. Then it is comforting to remember the blessings that are promised to those who forsake traditional beliefs: "And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Mark 13:13).

Not everyone encounters opposition while obeying Jesus' command to heal the sick and preach the gospel. But to those who do, it is so comforting to be assured that divine Love rewards its seekers and safeguards their progress. As we trust in God, our individual spiritual growth will inspire others - despite their fears and protests to the contrary.

If friends and family oppose your Christian faith, or your practice of spiritual healing, take courage. Their protests have no more power to hinder your spiritual progress and salvation than that statue has to stop the progress since the Civil War. As Mrs. Eddy quoted St. Paul: "Working and praying with true motives, your Father will open the way. 'Who did hinder you, that ye should not obey the truth?'" ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," Pg. 326).