

God, Life, and Everything "Why Study History?"

We have had three weeks of our Graveyard Tours so far. There's only one week left (so get your tickets now, before it's too late!)

One of my favorite things about the Graveyard Tours is that they are both historical and yet alive. The research that goes into them is fairly extensive, but it's that research that makes them so fun for me.

You see, when I was a kid - especially in middle school - I tended to skip out of Sunday School with my friend Doug. We'd sneak out the back door of the parish hall and hang out at the gas station sipping sodas.

But in 8th grade, I got crusty old Mr. Lee for a Sunday School teacher. And while everyone else groaned when he said we were going to learn church history, it was his class that made church come alive for me. We learned about Constantine and the Great Schism, and the Crusades and the Reformation.

He didn't just talk about dry dates - he talked about the people and why they did the things they did. He showed how they were real, sometimes crazy, and never all good or all bad. I was smitten.

Maybe the most important thing he showed us was why we study history. It isn't, as George Santayana is attributed with saying, that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Rather, we learn history so we can understand how we got to where we are today.

In our church, for example, we elect bishops while in most of the world bishops are appointed. How did that happen? History.

Our priests can get married while Roman Catholic priests can't. How did that happen? History.

We ordain women. Why? History.

It can go on and on. Back in earlier times, people made decisions that affect us to this day. Each decision that each generation makes is one layer piled on top of another - or more likely one thread woven in with another, and another, and another until you have a complex fabric that is both beautiful and horribly flawed.

Here's an example. I used to mock the old Women's Christian Temperance Union which was one of the driving forces behind what would eventually lead to Prohibition and all the mess that created. Were these just busy-bodies who refused to let people run their own lives?

Actually, they were a reaction against the disaster that alcohol had wrought on countless lives. The recent (to them) evolution of weak alcohol into strong whiskeys resulted in decades of increased alcoholism, domestic abuse, murder, job loss, and homelessness for entire families. People in the 19th century drank much more rampantly than we can imagine today.

Their movement was led by women largely because they - and their children were the victims of alcohol's most devastating effects. Their activism, born out of necessity, led to a women's movement and then to the drive for women's suffrage, the end of child labor, and the expansion of public education.

Sure, Prohibition had negative impacts, and it was rightly repealed. It was the wrong solution to the right problem. Even so, its positive effects are also felt today.

One of the reasons we study history is so we can follow the threads of our current messes back to their starting points. If we understand how we got here, we can better understand what might be the right steps to take from here.

Think of some of the big issues in our world today. Racism. Police militarization. Shipping jobs overseas. Mass shootings.

These things don't just happen. Telling people to just fix it, to pull themselves together, or get over it won't ever - ever - work. But going back into the past - following that thread - will help us figure out which direction to go. And it just might make us more understanding of our neighbors who struggle in ways we don't comprehend.

So if you get frustrated with the people around you who are doing things you find easy to criticize, maybe your best step would be to become a historian. Learn how things got the way they are. It's fascinating and, when you think about it, the most loving thing you can do.

And if you need inspiration, just come to the Graveyard Tours. There's one more weekend left!