COMMENTARY

Cryptic grave marker is a reminder of the haunting past



PHOTO BY FAIMON A. ROBERTS

The grave marker in Castor Baptist Church cemetery in Vernon Parish.



Faimon Roberts

On a hilltop a few miles east of Leesville in Vernon Parish stands a church. It's a small red-brick building, with an adjoining Sunday school wing and an asphalt parking lot.

It's called Castor Baptist Church, which locals pronounce "cast-AW." From the parking lot, you can see the nearby intersection of La. 184 and La. 468. Beyond that, pine trees. Less than a mile away, cars whizz by on La. 28, the main road between Leesville and Alexandria.

Next to the church is a cemetery, a several-acre plot with more than 1,000 burials, some stretching back more than 100 years.

One day last fall, I met with Amos Ezell at the church. Ezell is 87, and has many of the records related to the cemetery.

From the church's door we walked past the small playground and entered the chain link gates of the cemetery before climbing the slight incline to its center. Hundreds of headstones ranging from elaborate marble monuments to simple concrete rectangles set flush in the ground spread in every direction.

As we walked, Ezell pointed out notable graves and features of the sprawling graveyard, which includes military veterans of every American conflict from the Civil War through at least Vietnam. Several generations of my mother-in-law's family are buried in the Castor Cemetery.

But on this afternoon, it wasn't those graves I was interested in. Near the center of the cemetery, close to the top of the hill, is a simple grave marker maybe a foot by six inches, set in the ground. The inscription on it is simple, descriptive and maddeningly cryptic.

"UNKNOWN NEGRO."

That's all it says. No name, no date of death, nothing.

The marker is clear and easy to read. It certainly looks better than many of the older gravestones, some of which have worn away too much to be legible.

Another, several feet away, is older and appears to be concrete. It's too weathered to read, But it's the same size and shape as the "unknown Negro" stone. Ezell says he thinks it used to say the same thing.

Ezell pointed his finger at the legible stone before sweeping it toward the other.

"I think there are maybe several people buried under there," he said.

The cemetery's existing records don't shed light on who might be buried there, when they died or who buried them.

Given Louisiana's history, it's not hard to imagine that the person met a troubling end. That's certainly common enough in Louisiana. Enslaved people were often buried in unmarked graves and in small cemeteries, some of which have been lost forever.

Even after the Civil War, Black burials were often not treated with proper respect. Just an hour to the north and east of Castor is Colfax, the site of one of the worst post-Civil War massacres of Black Americans. There, dozens of victims were dumped in mass graves near the courthouse while their murderers were celebrated as heroes.

Many academics and individuals have done important and heartbreaking work on these sites and others like them.

At Castor, the situation appears different.

The "unknown Negro" grave is not the only anonymous burial marker there. There are approximately 15 others with "unknown" on them, all much more weathered. None of them mention the race of the grave's occupant.

Ezell has tried in the past to learn more about the grave. In 2013, he snapped a photo of it and put it on the website Findagrave.com in the hopes that it would generate a lead or two. In the 11 years since, his post has drawn three comments from visitors, none of whom gave any clue as to who it might be.

What is for certain is that at some point, somebody decided to mark the grave with the resident's race.

Ryan Seidemann, an attorney and cemetery researcher based in Louisiana who has examined thousands of graves across the southeastern United States, was stumped by it.

"I've never seen anything like this," he said after I sent him photos of the headstone.

His best guess, he said, was that it was some person who was perhaps passing through town and died without identification.

It was not unusual, he noted, for coroners or the state to pay cemeteries to bury such people and pay for a simple marker.

Without exhuming the body, Seidemann said, it's unlikely that we will ever know more about the person buried there, whether it was a man or a woman, old or young. Unless someone with information steps forward, we'll likely never know whether the person's family ever learned how their loved one's life came to an end.

All we have to go on is the gravestone, silent, tucked into an out-of-the-way church's cemetery. A reminder that Louisiana's past, even when it's unknown, can still haunt.

Faimon A. Roberts III is a columnist and editorial writer at The Advocate | The Times-Picayune. He can be reached at froberts@theadvocate.com.

Don't put the blame on Netanyahu



Cal Thomas

President Joe Biden says Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not doing enough to win the release of the remaining hostages held in Gaza by the terrorist group Hamas.

As the saying goes "with friends like these, who needs enemies?"

In his first statement since the recovery of six hostages murdered by Hamas, including American-Israeli Hersh Goldberg-Polin, Netanyahu refused all entreaties by the U.S. administration and other governments and protesters in Israel and the U.S. to agree to a ceasefire as a way to gain the release of the other hostages. What critics forget is that Hamas has refused all ceasefire offers, largely I suspect, because it knows the world will keep pressuring Israel to"do more" and not the terrorists to do less.

Too many seem to have forgotten, or ignored, the real culprits. It was Hamas that kidnapped and murdered innocent Israelis and took hostages in October. It is Hamas that has a covenant which calls for the creation of an Islamic state in all of Palestine and the obliteration of Israel. How do you negotiate with an enemy who believes their god has given direct orders to eliminate the Jewish state by any means necessary?

The answer should be obvious, but it isn't to many who have the false view that what Israel does or does not do matters to her enemies. Pressuring Israel has also been the incorrect approach over several U.S. administrations and Labor governments in Israel. Hamas and other terror groups get land, ceasefires, prisoner exchanges and financial help, but give nothing in return.

A Wall Street Journal editorial puts the blame where it belongs: "(the hostages) were killed in Rafah, where Biden and Harris delayed Israel's entry with threats and by withholding weapons."

Before World War II, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler offered a phony peace deal that included his keeping most of Czechoslovakia. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned to London from meeting Hitler in Munich and claimed to have made a "peace in our time" agreement with the German dictator. We know how that turned out.

There's a great line in the movie "Batman Begins." Liam Neeson as Henri Ducard says: "Crime cannot be tolerated. Criminals thrive on the indulgence of society's understanding." This could also apply to those who would use terror to achieve their ends and to American presidents and secretaries of state who have wrongly tried accommodation and negotiation, rather than pursuing victory over evil.

This admonition to ancient Israel from the Old Testament should be applied to the current situation and to future ones: "You must purge the evil from among you." (Deuteronomy 17:7)

Not to do so allows evil to grow. If a ceasefire were to be agreed to before Hamas is destroyed, it would live to fight another day. The same applies to Hezbollah which now occupies Lebanon. Not pursuing victory would be like a surgeon only removing half of a malignant tumor. When it comes to the blame game, remember that Gazans elected Hamas.

Hamas and all other groups that seek Israel's destruction must themselves be destroyed. Misinformed U.S. college students who chant "from the river to the sea" without knowing which river and which sea and nothing about the history of the region, are enabling antisemites and others who seek the same goals as the terrorists.

Only when the terrorists realize they have no hope and no help from America might they be persuaded that their goal is unachievable and then might possibly make a peace deal with Israel.

Until then, Netanyahu is right to fight on and President Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken are wrong to pressure him into making a deal that is not in the interest of Israel or America.

Email Cal Thomas at tcaeditors@tribpub.com.

Cash alone proves inadequate to solve problems of the poor



Megan McArdle

In recent years, a growing number of people have decided that the smart way to tackle poverty is with cash.

This idea assumes that most of what ails lower-income people is their lack of funds. Without money, a broken-down car or an eviction can cascade into a job loss and other financial crises, and the stress involved can lead to health issues and other problems.

Rather than try to solve these crises and problems, why not just plug the money hole? If people are groaning under medical debt, buy up the debt at pennies on the dollar, as the nonprofit Undue Medical Debt (formerly RIP Medical Debt) does, and then forgive it. If people are stuck in bad neighborhoods or bad jobs because they can't save up enough for an apartment deposit or a better vehicle, why not give them a chunk of cash? Better yet, why not a universal basic income (UBI) that would provide the security of knowing that, no matter what, some money will be coming into the kitty every month.

Opponents of this strategy retort that, if you pay people simply for breathing, they will stop working and become burdens on the public fisc. Theoretically, though, the opposite could happen: People could use the breathing room to invest in things that help them earn more money — things such as a reliable car, more education or a new business. At least, people might have more money or time to spend on child care or elder care.

This vision of poverty assistance has many virtues: It treats people with money problems as fellow citizens rather than science projects. It empowers them to make their own decisions. And the programs are easy to administer compared with complicated schemes to incentivize personal improvement; all that's needed is a check.

The trouble is, much recent evidence suggests that giving people cash doesn't actually solve their problems — at least not in the way it's intended.

For instance, when economists Raymond Kluender, Neale Mahoney, Francis Wong and Wesley Yin partnered with Undue Medical Debt to study the effect of debt forgiveness on its recipients, they found no improvement in utilization of health care, no relief from financial distress and no improvement in overall mental health. In fact, the most indebted people appeared to become more distressed, not less, after their debt was forgiven. Another group of researchers looked at the effect of unconditionally granting people one-time cash grants of up to $2,000 (two months' worth of household income, on average) and found that, while the recipients' consumption increased, they experienced no improvement in their financial health, their psychological well-being, their cognitive capacity or their physical condition.

Meanwhile, in a test of basic income, low-income households were given up to $1,000 a month — a roughly 40 percent income boost — and here, too, the benefits were exceedingly modest. While the recipients' savings increased somewhat, so did their debt, so that their household worth improved very little. Other measures of financial health such as credit delinquencies, bankruptcies, foreclosures and credit utilization were unchanged, and a temporary increase in self-reported financial health eventually evaporated.

Nor did recipients, as was hoped, use the cash cushion to find better jobs, invest in their own ability to earn, or pursue entrepreneurship. What did increase significantly was their consumption, while their work hours decreased — so that participants ended up earning about $1,500 less per year, net of the transfer, on average. Most of their extra time was spent on leisure, not care work.

Maybe handing people a chunk of cash that is large but still not adequate to cover all their unmet needs only creates new stress — as it forces them to decide which hole to plug in a very leaky boat. And maybe the reason that $1,000 a month didn't generate more benefit is that people got the money for only a few years. Would permanent payments have longer-term positive effects?

Or did these ideas just not pan out?

Taken together, the new findings are a blow to the just-give-people-cash school of thought. Willing as they are to give the needy a helping hand, Americans would like to know that the money is actually, you know, helping — with something other than a chronic shortage of leisure time.

Megan McArdle is @asymmetricinfo on X, formerly Twitter.

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