

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

7/3/11

A New Way Forward

Matthew 11:25

In William Hogeland's book about the Declaration of Independence, he describes the arrival in America in 1776 of British peace commissioners. The peace commission was led by Admiral Lord Richard Howe. His instructions from the King did not give him a great deal of maneuvering room. He had no authority to negotiate an end to the British policies on taxation and commerce which had stirred so much anger in America. But Howe was an American sympathizer. He understood that Americans would never submit themselves to the directives of the King in exchange for a pardon for their recent acts of rebellion. He recognized that keeping America in the British empire would require significant compromises from both sides and he was prepared to use his considerable political influence in England to bring that about. When Howe set foot on American soil he was optimistic that he could help to repair the relationship in a way that improved conditions in America while saving the king's face.

But when Howe disembarked from his ship at Staten Island, he was given news which made clear that his task would be far more difficult than he had anticipated. He arrived on July 12. Ten days earlier, while he was at sea, the Continental Congress had voted for independence. When Howe was informed of this he understood that his hopes for a negotiated settlement had been dashed. He would later write that what the Continental Congress did had "changed the ground." He had arrived too late. America had found a new way forward (*Declaration: The New Tumultuous Weeks When America Became Independent*, May 1 – July 4, 1776, pages 176-177).

In the 11th chapter of Matthew Jesus describes his ministry as a new way forward. There Jesus offers a parable about the spiritual poverty of his generation and its leaders. This generation has shown that it cannot come to grips with either John the Baptist or Jesus. The parable describes children who pipe happy songs for their friends, but the friends do not respond in an appropriate way. They refuse to dance to the music. Then they play mournful tunes to see if their playmates will like these any better. Once again they do not respond to the music. They refuse to play along by pretending to weep. The friends clearly have no intention of participating in the musical game.

This is how the people of influence have responded to John the Baptist and Jesus. John brought one style of music and Jesus brought another. John came as a stern personality, a teetotaler with an austere diet. The important people responded by labeling him demon-possessed. Jesus was convivial. He came eating and drinking with all kinds of people. The people who mattered respond to Jesus by dismissing him as a glutton and drunkard. This generation has had every opportunity to receive the grace of God, but they have refused it. They have seen Jesus do mighty works. They have an abundance of evidence about who Jesus is and what he is doing but they have chosen not to respond. They will not dance to Jesus' music. They will not respond to the music of grace.

After calling attention to the fact of his rejection Jesus refuses to grieve over it. Instead he thanks God for giving ordinary people a new way forward. He prays, "I thank you, Father ... because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants

(Matthew 11:25).” Jesus thanks God for those who do respond to his message of grace. It is the “infants” who “get it.” It is the poor, the sinners, and the tax collectors who are ready to dance to the music of grace when the wise and privileged want nothing to do with it. The “infants” are those who know they need God and do not presume to pass judgment on others. They are the most vulnerable ones who are grateful for every gift from God. They are the ones who are willing to learn from Jesus as they leave the burden of a self centered life behind. They are the ones who see that God has changed the ground and they want to be part of a new way forward.

The “infants” for whom Jesus gave thanks were people like Eulogia Cedeno. He grew up in the poorest section of Spanish Harlem in New York City. He dropped out of high school, became a drug addict, and joined a gang. He became vice president of the Renegades, one of the fiercest Harlem street gangs. His life was consumed by the pursuit of self indulgence. He ended up doing serious time in prison.

But at some point Eulogia found a new way forward. As a 35 year old ex-con he had become the leader of the Renegades and transformed that group into a community service organization. Under his leadership they restored abandoned buildings, changing these dilapidated ruins into livable apartments available at affordable rates. Eulogia Cedeno learned to take pride in his community. He said, “If I see something messed up, like garbage cans turned over, I ask people and they help me clean it up.” Cedeno learned the dance of grace. He recognized that God was changing the ground in his community and he wanted to be part of it.

In the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy we read about a people who are determined to find a new way forward. The Israelites were ready to enter the promised land. Moses is helping to prepare them for this journey. They had lived in slavery for five generations and could no longer remember what it was like to determine their own destiny. They had won their freedom from the Egyptians, but so far all they had been able to do with that freedom was to wander in the wilderness.

Moses understood that the people wanted more than this. They wanted more than simply to wander and gather the necessities of life. They wanted a land they could call their own. They wanted to become a nation. They were looking for a new way forward.

What did Moses have to say to a people bent on becoming a nation? He could have told them to build the best army in the world. Moses knew better than that. They had all seen Egypt’s first rate fighting force drown in the Red Sea. So if they don’t start with an army where do they start? Maybe what they need first is a king, or a legal system, or a blueprint for economic success. But Moses did not call for any of these as the first step in nation-building. Listen again to his words “... keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways (Deuteronomy 28:29).”

Moses was telling his people that the new way forward was about obeying God and caring for neighbors. Moses understood that the future would not be determined by the self centered pursuits of the wise and the privileged. The future would belong to those who recognize and celebrate that God has changed the ground.