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Living By God's Generosity

Luke 17:4

This past week, James Kenny, the former U. S. ambassador to the Republic of Ireland spoke in Springfield. He served in Ireland from 2003 to 2006. This was a time when great progress was made in reducing the armed conflict that had crippled that island for many years. The Ambassador was asked what he had learned from Ireland's experience that could be translated to other troubled places in our world.

Kenny responded that the turning point for Ireland came when people learned to look forward rather than backward. When they were ruled by their memories of past injustices or past atrocities they were stuck in an endless cycle of hatred and violence. But when they began to look forward to imagine a different kind of future, the destructive hold of their painful past began to give way. The kind of future they wanted required that all parties come together to work for the common good. The practice of looking forward taught them that the divisions of the past were a luxury no one could afford.

Psalms 137 emerges from a moment when the Jewish exiles are stuck in a cycle of hatred and violence. They have been forcibly evicted from their homes and transported to the homeland of their Babylonian enemies. The worst part of this disaster is that they have been separated from Jerusalem which is the center of their faith. The Babylonians show their cruelty by taunting them to sing their joyful songs of faith. The psalmist conveys the despair of the people in these words:

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand wither (Psalm 137:1-5).

This note of deep sadness then gives way to a more ominous note. The cycle of hatred and violence draws the Psalmist into the language of vengeance where one imagines the worst possible fate for the enemy. The psalm ends with words we don't like to read or contemplate in church:

Happy shall they be who take
your little ones
and dash them against the rock
(Psalm 137:9)!

But the day would come when the exiles would learn to look forward and set aside the cycle of hatred and violence. They would learn how to practice their faith in a strange land where most people were adherents of another religion. They would discover the advantages of living in a multi-cultural society. When the time comes that the exiles are given the opportunity to go back to Jerusalem, many choose to remain in Babylon. They come to believe that God has led them to this place and shown them how to be partners with the once hated Babylonians in building a new kind of future.

In the 17th chapter of Luke we find Jesus preparing the disciples to leave behind the familiar cycle of hatred and violence that has defined their society. He is teaching them to look forward by practicing an ethic of generosity and forgiveness that goes far beyond anything they thought was

possible. In this chapter the disciples come to Jesus feeling overwhelmed by what he is teaching them. They know they do not have the resources to do what he is asking. They want Jesus to equip them more fully for the daunting task of forgiving enemies and healing deep wounds. They say to Jesus, “Increase our faith (Luke 17:6).”

Jesus points out that they don’t need any more faith than they already have. Jesus invites them to understand their discipleship in the context of God’s generosity. It is God’s generosity and not our faith that frees us from the destructive cycles of the past and puts us on a road to a different kind of future. On this road we learn to be partners with those we may have feared or distrusted in times past.

The celebration of God’s generosity has always been at the heart of World Communion Sunday. It was first celebrated in 1933 in the Shadyside Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The idea originated with the stewardship committee of the church which was looking for a way to affirm the world-wide nature of the congregation’s mission. It was the darkest year of the Great Depression. Storm clouds of hatred and violence hovered over Europe with the spread of Nazism and Fascism. It was a time of fear and dread. The Presbyterian stewardship committee saw World Communion as a way to proclaim that the generosity of God which brings us together is stronger than the forces that were tearing the world apart.

The concept spread slowly at first. But during the Second World War the celebration of World Communion took hold because it symbolized the efforts of the allies to hold the world together. It gave witness to the global partnership through which a new future was coming into being (John A. Dallas, Wekiva Presbyterian Church, Longwood, Florida and *The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 7, 2002).

The message of this day speaks profoundly to our own time of global fear and conflict. By the generosity of God we are invited to this table where every wall of division is broken down.