

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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Paradigm of Faith

Luke 17:6

In Ken Burns' documentary "The War," he tells the story of Robert Kashiwagi. Kashiwagi was recruited into the U.S. Army from the internment camp to which his family had been forcibly relocated at the beginning of the war. His Japanese-American combat unit was one of the most highly decorated of the war. These soldiers fought with incredible bravery to establish their credentials as loyal Americans.

Kashiwagi returned from the war after receiving four separate injuries in Italy and France. He secured a job with the California Highway Department. The first day on the job proved to be especially challenging. The foreman informed Kashiwagi that his co-workers were not happy to be in his presence. One of them said to the foreman, "If that Jap is going to work here I am going to quit." Kashiwagi understood that the foreman was telling the story to encourage him to quit first. But Kashiwagi stood his ground. He refused to resign and spent 32 years with the department.

What Kashiwagi and his co-workers were experiencing was the breakdown of the old ways of segregating the diverse cultures of America. This was just one of the changes that the war had set in motion. A new world was beginning to emerge.

The 137th Psalm describes the experience of a people who are living through a similar time of change. They have been forcibly evicted from their homes and transported to the homeland of their Babylonian enemies. It is an inconceivable disaster 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 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 137:4-5).

But the day would come when the exiles would learn to sing again. Singing would empower them to remember who they are. Singing would become a way to affirm their faith in a strange land. Over time they would grow beyond the parochialism that defined their lives before the exile. They would learn to celebrate their distinctive identity while respecting those who are different. When the time comes that the exiles are given the opportunity to go back to Jerusalem, many choose to remain in Babylon. They have already embraced a new paradigm of faith in a diverse cultural setting. They have come to believe that it was God who led them to this place.

In the 17th chapter of Luke we find the disciples struggling to come to terms with a similar experience of transformation. They are trying to adjust to the challenge of living as disciples of a very unconventional rabbi. Because they are feeling overwhelmed, they conclude that they do not have the resources to carry out the work that Jesus has given them. So they come to Jesus asking to be better equipped for their task. They say, "Increase our faith (Luke 17:6)."

Jesus invites them to understand their practice of discipleship in the context of a new paradigm of faith. Jesus tells them that they don't need any more faith. They have more than enough because it is God who bears the burden of their ministry. God is already using them to create a new world of grace. Discipleship isn't about believing more or doing more. It is about taking ourselves less seriously so we may truly celebrate what God is doing in the world. God is always bigger than we think.

In 1759 Scots-Irish settlers build a church 15 miles from the town of Chester, South Carolina. They gave the church a rather unusual name. They called it the Catholic Presbyterian Church. This is probably the only time the name Catholic has been used for a Presbyterian church. Following the Apostles' Creed they understood the word "Catholic" in its root meaning, which is "universal." Their choice of a name said something very important about how they experienced the activity of God at this moment in their lives.

Before leaving Ireland these people were divided into three different Presbyterian groups. These groups defined themselves by how they responded to laws in Ireland and Scotland which gave the government control over the church. Most Presbyterians reluctantly compromised with government officials on this issue. But there were well organized minority groups who adamantly refused to compromise and withdrew from the larger Presbyterian fellowship. Some took on the name Covenanters. Others called themselves Seceders.

When settlers representing all three groups arrived in Chester County, South Carolina they discovered that God was bigger than they thought. The issue which separated them in Ireland was gone. There was no government interference in the churches on the American frontier. The Catholic Presbyterian Church was a place where they could move beyond the parochialism of the past and come together as a family again. Here they understood that God was creating a new world where they could sing the old songs and learn a new paradigm of faith.