

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

Palm Sunday

April 1, 2007

State of Mind

Philippians 2:5

Nevin Taggart is a retired teacher who spent much of his career in Belfast, Northern Ireland. There he worked to bring at risk Protestant and Catholic teenagers together so they could build bridges across a deep divide of suspicion, hatred, and violence. In retirement he has returned to his ancestral farm near the Northern Irish village of Bushmills. Now he enjoys helping people who are trying to trace their ancestors in that part of Ireland. When I asked the proprietor of the Bed and Breakfast where I was staying if there were any local genealogy centers she gave me Nevin's name. I was working on a part of my family history that I knew very little about. All I had were the names in the family Bible going back eight generations, the tradition that they were Scots who had come to South Carolina, and a theory that they must have come from Northern Ireland.

I didn't know what to expect when I knocked on Nevin's door. He invited me in and introduced me to his mangy looking dog, whose name I don't remember. I am not a dog person but Nevin seemed quite impressed that the dog took a liking to me. Then he explained that he found the dog in the pound and he had purposely chosen the dog that seemed the most deeply scarred from abuse. He flashed a big smile as he described the amazing progress she had made in such a short time. I began to recognize the continuity between Nevin's career with at risk youth and the obvious delight he took in healing a troubled dog.

Nevin understood the insight that Dora Horn conveyed in a novel called *In The Image*. There she describes how the lives of teenagers are molded by outside influences. She writes:

Most of the time, the clay that forms a young person's life is kneaded and prodded slowly, gradually, by him and by others, until a shape is coaxed out of it, and it is only after many years, long after the clay has hardened, that one can go back and trace the polished surface, searching for the fingerprints of those who helped to mold it long ago. But sometimes, often by accident, a dent will be made so deep, in clay just beginning to dry, that no amount of prodding will cover it up again (quoted by L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Century*, February 20, 2007, page 41).

We all have dents that cannot be polished away. These are the deep wounds that require the skill of a master healer. In the second chapter of Philippians Paul is writing to a people who are wounded in this way. The church is living through intense persecution. We don't know the exact nature of the persecution, but it is clear that the church is severely dented and losing touch with its mission. Paul wants the Philippians to experience the one power that can heal their deepest wounds and inspire them to move ahead in mission again. Paul says it like this, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5)." Paul is inviting the Philippians to be more fully connected to the Christ who changes the world by loving it.

This is the state of mind that the disciples are celebrating when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt in Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that the disciples are shouting to express their joy over the power of Jesus' love to remake their lives and their world. The celebration is cut short by the Pharisees who say, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop (Luke 19:39)." The Pharisees intervene to prevent the kind of change the disciples are seeking. Theirs is the voice of self protection. It is the same voice that is used a few days later by the chief priests who have Jesus arrested. It is the voice of Herod and Pilate as they dance around the issue of what to do about Jesus. In the end this strategy of self protection dispatches Jesus to a cross of execution. The only one in this narrative who is able to break free from the mind-set of self protection is Jesus. He understands the wounds of the human family and finds joy in healing them. Jesus responds to the challenge of the Pharisees by telling them that they are trying to prevent a force that cannot be stopped. This irrepressible love is the one power that can heal the wounds of people like us. Paul wants the Philippians to receive and practice that love. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5)."

The day after my visit to Nevin Taggart's house he called me on the phone. There was an unmistakable note of celebration in his voice. He said, "I've got some news that you will be happy to hear. I have found the names of your ancestors on a ship called *The Lord Dunluce* which sailed from this area to Charleston, South Carolina in 1772. They were part of a group of 500 families that sailed on five ships organized by a Presbyterian minister. If you can come over tomorrow I will give you all the details." What could be better than learning that these ancestors I knew nothing about had come to America as part of a Presbyterian church outing! Later I saw my ancestor's signature on a statement thanking the captain for getting them safely to their destination. Because of unfavorable winds it took eleven weeks to make the crossing instead of the usual eight weeks. Their statement said that they could not have survived those eleven weeks on the high seas without the sermons and prayers of their pastor.

When I arrived at Nevin's house the next day, I was greeted once again by his dog. It seemed to me then that she was about the happiest dog I had ever seen. It occurred to me that the dog and I had a lot in common. Nevin found joy in healing wounded dogs and helping confused Americans looking for their ancestors. As I prepared to leave, happily loaded with great information, Nevin wanted to talk again about his work with wounded young people. He said that those in charge of the program always wanted to impose a one size fits all approach. He said, "I had my own style of working with these kids and it really worked." Looking once again at the happiest dog in the world I could not help but nod in agreement. Nevin then spoke of the anxiety he felt as he waited for news of a new power sharing agreement for governing Northern Ireland. Time was running out on a deadline for establishing this. Then I realized that this was the goal for which Nevin had worked for so many years. What he did with at risk kids was his way of working from the bottom up to bring healing to a wounded society. I said my goodbyes and drove to Belfast to drop off my rental car and catch a train to Dublin.

When I walked into the train station Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams were on the big screen in the snack bar. They had just met face to face for the first time. They were announcing the long anticipated power sharing agreement. But in that moment I saw beyond the screen another face. It was the face of Nevin Taggart smiling at those two politicians the same way he smiled at his dog. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5)."