

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

April 12, 2009

The Logic of Easter

John 20:18

Henry Ingram is a Southerner who is used to getting what he wants. When he purchased 1,688 acres of land in Jasper County, South Carolina, he went to the courthouse to file an unusual deed restriction. It prohibits, “anyone of the Yankee race—those who were born above the Mason-Dixon Line or who have lived there for a year or more—from owning any part of the property. Also anyone named Sherman can never even set foot on the property.” It turns out that the plantation which was located on this property in the 1860s was burned to the ground by the troops of General William T. Sherman.

Ingram, who owns several video gambling parlors in the area and lives on Hilton Head Island, described his action in these words:

Slowly but surely [the Yankees] have taken over Hilton Head, they’ve taken over Beaufort County, and are infiltrating Jasper County...They are worse than fire ants. This is the prettiest piece of land in the county and I want to keep it that way (Savannah, Georgia Morning News, quoted in *The Bulletin of Chester County Genealogical Society*, Vol. 32, No. 4, page 136).

Mr. Ingram’s action is an extreme example of a logic that operates in all of us. In one way or another we all make decisions based on fear and self protection. We all seek to protect ourselves from people and situations we perceive to be threatening. Peter is motivated by this concern in the 10th chapter of the Book of Acts. He is preaching in the most unlikely setting he can imagine. He is in the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. This is not where Peter wants to be. Worshiping with Gentiles goes against the grain of everything Peter has been taught for most of his life. These are not people who can be trusted. The Romans are at best a problem and at worst a dangerous enemy. They are not the kind of people who belong in his community or his family. They are the ones from whom he needs to be protected.

Peter is shocked to discover that God does not accept this logic of self protection. The centurion has been visited by the Spirit in a dream and instructed to seek out the preached word among those who believe in Jesus. Peter has received his own message in a dream which has revealed to him that the Gentiles, even the ones who are Romans, are to be included in the church. It is at this moment that Peter comes to perceive in a new way what Jesus’ resurrection means. Jesus was raised from death so that Jews like Peter and Gentiles like Cornelius can become one family. This is not the family that Peter wants. This family is based on a logic that Peter does not understand.

James Lowry has described how his father taught him the logic of Easter. On a hot summer night in 1958 the phone rang and awakened the family. It was the chief of police from their town in the Piedmont of South Carolina. The chief reported that one of his officers had just caught a twelve year old boy trying to burglarize his father’s hardware store. Billy was growing up on the wrong side of town with irresponsible parents. Before asking about the condition of the store Mr. Lowry asked where they had taken Billy. They had taken him twenty miles away to the county jail.

Lowry remembered his father's response at breakfast the next morning. He read Scripture as he always did after breakfast. But this day his father skipped ahead of where he left off the day before. He went straight to Matthew 25 and read, "In as much as you have done it for the least of these...you have done it unto me." After that he offered a morning prayer for the family as he always did. But on this day he also prayed for Billy. Then he got up and kissed his wife goodbye and drove twenty miles to the county courthouse. There he talked his friend, the county judge, into sentencing Billy to live with them for three months. Billy was welcomed as a son and brother. He became part of the family, living with them off and on until he finished high school. He grew up to become a responsible member of the community. Lowry summed up what his father taught him in these words:

What my father did, of course, was based on upside-down logic. Nobody invites the one who has demonstrated that he wants to steal from you to live with you. Nobody, that is, except maybe the one who ate with sinners and those who by faith follow after him. What Pappy did for Billy was based on the same kind of upside-down logic that comes from believing the Jesus narrative really is true, including most specially the part where it says that he was raised from the dead (James S. Lowry, *Journal For Preachers*, Easter 2009, pages 4-5).

When Mary Magdalene visited the cemetery on the first Easter morning she found the logic of her existence turned upside-down. She had come to grieve the loss of the most important relationship in her life. Her discovery of an empty tomb is not good news. It looks like someone had been engaged in mischief. The purpose of her visit has been frustrated. Mary has no clue to what has really happened until she hears the voice calling her name. The one who was certified as dead is speaking to her. The one who had so blatantly challenged the logic of self protection and then paid the ultimate price is now standing before her. The world she has known is shattered. A strange new world is beginning to emerge.

Biographers of John Calvin cannot say with certainty when he was converted to the strange new world of church reform. Calvin wrote thousands of pages of theology, biblical commentaries, and sermons. But he wrote very little about himself. Some scholars have suggested that the moment of transition for Calvin came when he began to study the language of Greek. In 1530 Greek served as the boundary between two worlds. Those who knew Greek could read the Bible more or less the way it was written rather than the way the medieval translators of the Latin versions wanted people to read it. These translators had twisted the biblical text to protect the practices of the medieval church. Greek was the essential tool by which the church was reinvented in the 16th century. When Calvin learned Greek he crossed the most important boundary of his age. It changed his understanding of who he was. (T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: A Biography*, page 21).

That's what happened to Mary Magdalene in the garden outside the tomb. When she responds to the instruction of the risen Lord to go and share this good news with other disciples she crosses the most important boundary of her life. On the other side she no longer needs the old logic of fear and self protection. The logic of Easter changes everything. That same logic calls us into a new community of grace.