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**The Way of Christ**

Matthew 11:29

In Billy Kennedy's book *The Scots-Irish in the Carolinas*, he cites passages from letters received by these first generation settlers in America. The letters were sent by their families in Ireland. They display the warmth and tenderness of loving families trying to remain connected as they are separated by a vast ocean and the very different cultures in which they lived. The letters also have about them the bittersweet quality of communication between family members who know they will probably never see each other again. Each letter is written with an awareness that it could be the last exchange between loved ones.

A common theme of these letters is to remind the new arrivals in America to remember who they are. They are people who are loved by the families they left behind in Ireland and they are people who belong to God. One letter sent from Antrim County, Ireland to Chester County, South Carolina in 1803 said this:

This comes with our love and duty to let you know that we are well at present, thanks be to God the giver of all our mercies. May we know that we are not our own but that we are bought with a price and may we be found with Christ on the day that he makes. I would heartily advise you and yours...forget not the Lord Jesus Christ who preserved you in your youth and riper years both by sea and land (Letter from William and Nancy Morrison to John Morrison, page 173).

This letter like so many others challenges the new settlers to remember that their long journey across the ocean is about much more than attaining worldly success. It is also a spiritual journey in which they are called to follow the way of Christ.

In the first chapter of Exodus we find the story of a people who are making a spiritual journey. The story begins with a shrewd political move by the most powerful leader in the world. Pharaoh believes that national security is threatened by the changing demographic trends in Egyptian society. The birthrate of the recent immigrants, the Hebrews, is outpacing that of the long established and more affluent Egyptians. Pharaoh tries to curb the high birthrates of the Hebrews by taking away their privileges and making them work harder. He reduces them to slavery. But the scheme backfires. Scripture tells us that the more the Hebrews were oppressed the more they multiplied. Because the Hebrews remembered who they were their spirit was not broken.

Pharaoh then takes a more drastic step. This time he orders the Hebrew midwives to kill the Hebrew infants that he considers to be the greatest threat to national security. The male babies are to be euthanized at birth. But once again the most powerful leader in the world is thwarted. This plan fails because the midwives have not forgotten who they are. Scripture tells us that they feared God more than they feared Pharaoh. They defy Pharaoh by concocting an amazing story about the Hebrew women being so strong that they deliver their babies before the midwives can arrive on the scene.

It is the faith of these midwives that the Presbyterians in Ireland hope their sons and daughters have taken with them to America. These women have no worldly power at their command. But they

have the spiritual grounding to resist the most powerful ruler in the world. They refuse to let Pharaoh make them the instruments of his destructive purposes. They will not go the way of P

haraoh because they are already following the way of God.

This is precisely the point that Jesus is making for the disciples in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. In this passage the disciples are confronted by the failure of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. The fact is that Jesus' recent mission of preaching, teaching, and healing produced very little by way of measurable results. Most of what he did fell on blind eyes. Much of what he said fell on deaf ears. The disciples are desperate to understand why Jesus was being so thoroughly rejected.

Jesus invites the disciples to see this failure from a radically different perspective. They should not expect Jesus to measure up to a worldly understanding of success because that is not what he came to do. He did not come to dominate their society but to subvert it in the same way the midwives subverted the purposes of Pharaoh. He came to take the values of their world and turn them upside down. He came to offer a kingdom based not on power, but on grace. He came to invite us to resist the way of Pharaoh and follow the way of Christ. Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart... (Matthew 11:29)."

In the 1840s David and Nancy Knox left Ireland and moved into the slave culture of South Carolina. They received a letter from her parents in Ireland. It said:

We are all well and thank God for his kind mercies to us. Hoping this will find you all enjoying the same blessing. We record your kind letter of August 13<sup>th</sup>, one month after its date. You say you got your blankets burned. You may expect them to be replenished when Hugh Alexander arrives with you. Be thankful that your children were not burned with the blankets and be kind to the black man who saved the children. Although his skin is black, he is one of God's creations as well as you. Although he is now in bondage, death will set him free. No more, but may God Almighty protect you and your family. This is the sincere wish of your ever affectionate father and mother till death, Esther and Samuel Blair (*The Scots-Irish in the Carolinas*, pages 184-185).

This is a subversive letter from home. What the Blairs said to their children still has resonance with us. You may live in a culture that reduces human beings to commodities, but that's not who you are. You are already yoked to Christ who is leading you in a very different way. Learn from him and know that you belong to God.