



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
A. Roy Medley, General Secretary



Personal Reflections

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Lessons from Ireland

Part 2

Towards the end of our journey, we visited Kildare, the site where St. Brigid founded her double monastery for both monks and nuns around 470 AD. In the area there is a well named for St. Brigid that has long been a place of healing and a pilgrimage site for Christians. Earlier in our journey, we had been given a long ribbon, and on that ribbon we were to write the names of persons, things, incidents or memories that we needed to release into the hands of God in order to receive healing. On the day we were to visit St. Brigid's Well, we were to leave our ribbons hanging from a prayer tree, symbolic of having released into the hands of God whatever we had inscribed on the ribbons.

At the beginning of the pilgrimage, I had begun reading Nouwen's short work on prayer, *With Open Hands*. The opening chapter, "With Clenched Fists," talks of our resistance to being fully open to God in prayer through the use of the metaphor of clenched fists. He writes, "The resistance to praying is like the resistance of tightly clenched fists."

He builds upon the metaphor with the story of a woman who was admitted to the psychiatric ward of a hospital. He describes her as wild and lashing out "...so much that the doctors had to take everything from her." However, as hard as they tried, there was one thing they could not pry out of her grip: a small coin. "It was as though she would lose her very self along with the coin," he writes. "If they deprived her of that last possession, she would have nothing more and be nothing more."

Nouwen then applies the metaphor with these words, "When you are invited to pray, you are asked to open your tightly clenched fist and give up your last coin."

As I meditated upon that metaphor, knowing that I had received an invitation to release that which needed healing into God's hands through the ritual of leaving the ribbon behind at St. Brigid's Well, I realized that I had to come to terms with the woundings that had pierced my heart during our denominational controversies over these past years and the woundings that I had surely, even if unintentionally, inflicted upon others.

God was inviting me to let go of the mixture of shame, anger and remorse that had settled within me. As my memory quickly dredged up the wounding words I had heard or read, or replayed the images of events or persons linked with the woundings of those days, I discovered how tightly my memory and my heart had grasped and clung to those hurts. I recalled an image from C. S. Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*. After the woman died, it was revealed that she had grumbled so much in life that her soul had become a grumble. It is true that we can grasp our hurts and wounds so tightly and ferociously, rehearsing and nursing them, reliving the many feelings they draw up from their dark dank well in our memory that they are no longer just incidental to us—they are us. "Wounded R Us."

A vivid illustration came the day we visited the memorial to the victims of what we call the "Great Potato Famine" and the Irish call the "Great Hunger." From 1845–1850, a blight devastated the potato harvest, destroying the primary food of the Irish. It is estimated that over a million men, women and children died from starvation during this time and another million fled as emigrants to America and other lands out of a population of eight million.

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Lessons from Ireland – Part 2

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We walked the grounds of one of many mass graves that had been created because the deaths outnumbered the ability of the communities to bury them individually. Here numberless and now nameless persons lay interred. These memories together with many others long simmered in resentment between the Irish and the English, between Catholic and Protestant and flared up in “the troubles” that erupted in 1960s in Belfast and Northern Ireland whose tragic history we know only too well.

As we left the memorial site, our Irish driver spoke a word that pointed to Nouwen’s image of the clenched fist. “You know, we have to move on, don’t we? We can’t let these things from the past overwhelm us forever.” His words sparked in me the memory of Bishop Tutu’s words in the South African context: “Without forgiveness, there is no future.”

Later, as I held the ribbon across my lap, pen in hand, names and incidents rushed over me. As I wrote each one upon the ribbon, I prayed, “I forgive you.” Finished, I felt unsatisfied. There was the vague stirring that I was not really finished, that the list was not yet complete. A flash of insight was given to me, and taking pen into hand again I wrote the final name on the ribbon—my name.

“Maybe someone will say to you, ‘You have to forgive yourself,’” writes Nouwen. “But that isn’t possible. What is possible is to open your hands without fear, so that the One who loves you can blow your sins away.” The insight that had been given to me was that it is not until we can release not only our wounded memories, but also our very selves into the hands of Christ, that we can receive them back again healed and whole. Because we are fallen and live with others as wounded by sin as we are, we are called through the prayer of forgiveness to a constant releasing of the wounds that would define us. Has not Jesus taught us the way of his grace and peace when he taught us to pray, “and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

So, at Brigid’s Well in Kildare, a ribbon with my name on it flutters, a symbol of the unclenched fist I seek to practice as I offer myself anew and anew to God in order to receive myself back from God new and new.



American Baptists Serving as the Hands and Feet of Christ

Office of the General Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA • PO Box 851 • Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851
800-ABC-3USA, extension 2274 • Roy.Medley@abc-usa.org
www.abc-usa.org