

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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Table Fellowship

Luke 15:2

In 1835 thirty members of First Presbyterian Church in Springfield formed a new church with a very specific identity. Second Presbyterian Church, which later changed its name to Westminster, was committed to bringing wholeness to a society broken by the institution of slavery. One of the leaders of this effort for the church and the community was a man named Erastus Wright. Wright was a New Englander who came to Springfield in 1821. One source described him as a wealthy client of Abraham Lincoln's law practice. He was also a school teacher and for ten years served as Sangamon County's school commissioner.¹

Wright was active in the statewide anti-slavery society and one of the organizers of the Underground Railroad for this part of the state. His home, located near the present day intersection of Walnut and Jefferson Streets, was a station on the Springfield Underground Railroad. One Springfield resident who knew him described him in these words:

Erastus Wright was another personality...To the citizens his outspoken abolitionism...was a strange and dangerous doctrine; while the youngsters found a perpetual source of wonder in the trained elk which he rode and drove in harness.²

I am trying to visualize Erastus Wright riding through the streets of Springfield on the back of a trained elk. No wonder they thought he was strange. But people had other reasons for thinking him strange. The anti-slavery movement was not a popular cause in Springfield in 1835. Most people considered it a subversive movement which threatened the long-standing compromise which kept the fragile Union from breaking apart.. Erastus Wright and his newly created church were seen as strange and dangerous. When former slaves were received into the membership these suspicions were confirmed.³

In the 15th chapter of Luke we read that Jesus was viewed with similar suspicion. The Pharisees and scribes spoke for the leaders of Jesus' society in raising questions about his activities. Luke tells us that they were grumbling about the way Jesus ministered to people with questionable reputations. Those who valued their social standing did not mix with tax collectors and sinners the way Jesus did. Luke points to a common thread in the rejection of John the Baptist and Jesus. It has to do with their table practices. John was criticized for not eating and drinking with other people. That is, he had table fellowship with no one. Jesus on the other hand, freely socialized with a wide variety of people. So he was labeled "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:34)." Jesus was considered strange and dangerous because his table fellowship included people who were outcasts. That was the reason for the grumbling. Jesus responds to the grumbling by telling parables about people who search for that which is lost. He speaks of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep who are in the fold to search for the one which is lost. He describes the woman who has lost only one of her ten silver coins. She is not satisfied until she has searched the house diligently and located the coin that has been misplaced. When that which is lost is found, the woman and the shepherd respond in the same way. They celebrate what they have found. They call their friends together and throw a party.

Jesus tells these parables to help his listeners to a better understanding of who God is. God is always searching for a lost humanity. God is reaching out to those who are trapped by the structures of prejudice, fear, greed. God is working to create a table fellowship which embraces all who are lost and then celebrates their recovery. Jesus invites lost people like us to be part of this strange and dangerous task. That is what our legacy of caring is all about.

Endnotes

1. "Now They Belong to the Ages," pages 148-150
2. Paul Angle, *Here I Have Lived*, quoted by Richard E. Hart in "Lincoln's Springfield," *Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Summer 2006, page 1.
3. Second Presbyterian Church records report the reception of a mulatto Underground Railroad conductor named Jamieson Jenkins and his wife Elizabeth in 1848.