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The Table of God

Luke 14:13

On our recent trip to Scotland we visited the University of Glasgow where we were fascinated by its impressive neo-Gothic towers. I had a particular interest in learning about this university because one of my ancestors had studied for the ministry there. James McGarragh is to the best of my knowledge my only Scots Irish ancestor who had a college education. He studied at the University of Glasgow in the 1780s, was ordained, and came to America in 1790.

Barbara and I were looking at a campus map on a kiosk near the center of the campus. Suddenly my attention was drawn to the building that was labeled “archives.” The archives building was located a few blocks away from the main campus, but it was too good an opportunity to pass up. We made our way to the site where the archives was supposed to be, but the buildings were warehouses with no signage on them. We decided that Barbara would wait at this corner while I circled the block looking for an archives sign. About 20 minutes later I found some information on another campus building which identified the particular warehouse which housed the archives. Barbara in the meantime had also found the warehouse but it only took her three minutes. She simply asked a nice man who was passing by.

When we finally got into the warehouse we had to climb three flights of stairs and wind our way through long bare walled corridors. Then we checked in with staff members at three stations before we were admitted to the archives. At each of these stations we were asked the same question, “How did you find us?” At first we thought they did not want to be found, but we soon learned that they were quite hospitable and helpful. They made a valiant effort to find documents on my ancestor, but they did not succeed. They explained that my ancestor probably did not graduate. In fact, many students from this period attended classes with no expectation of graduating. Some chose not to graduate because they could not pay the fee that was assessed for graduation. Others did not graduate because of a so-called “religious test.” At that time only members of the Church of Scotland could receive degrees in Scottish universities.

In that culture religion was a form of social control. It was a way of determining who was “in” and who was “out.” James McGarragh grew up as a Reformed Presbyterian in Ireland. He could not pursue higher education in Ireland because only Anglicans could be admitted to Irish universities in those days. I had always known that. But what I did not know before my visit to the Glasgow University archives was that in Scotland he could be admitted but he could not graduate. Learning this reminded me of one of the most important contributions that our nation has made. It was America that first taught the world that labeling or excluding people by their religious identity is no way to run a great nation.

An obsession with who is “in” and who is “out” was a feature of the society in which Jesus lived. Many of Jesus’ contemporaries imagined the end of human history as a great banquet and they had very definite notions of who would be invited and who would be excluded. Among the books and documents found in the Dead Sea Scrolls is one group’s invitation list for that great banquet. Those to

be invited are “the wise men of the congregation, the learned and the intelligent, men whose way is perfect and men of ability... the men of renown.” But even more interesting is the description of those who are not invited:

No man smitten in his flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish; no old and tottering man unable to stay still in the midst of the congregation; none of these shall come... ¹

To people who have been raised with this elitist standard of who is in and who is out, Jesus offers an alternative view of the table of God. He says, “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed (Luke 14:13-14a).” Jesus specifically names those most likely to be excluded as a way of saying that no one is turned away from the table of God.

In the 14th chapter of Luke the gospel writer shows us how the table of God works. Jesus is the dinner guest of a very prominent Pharisee. There is no seating chart for the banquet table. The guests are supposed to be able to figure it out. Jesus observes the nervous way in which the guests shuffle around the table looking for the seat which reflects their social standing. Everyone wants the best possible place, but they do not want to overreach. Those who take a place above their station in life risk the humiliation of being sent to the lowest place. Jesus is the one who sees this dance for what it is.

Jesus invites those present to imagine another paradigm of human community—a paradigm which reflects the table of God. He points out that the low end of the table may not be so bad after all. They might really enjoy getting together with people who do not have prominent places in the community. And if they are daring enough to invite to their parties the outcasts of their society they will be blessed. For through these broken people they will begin to understand something about themselves. For at the deepest level of our existence we are broken, too. The outcasts can be the mirrors in which to see and understand our own brokenness. Through these mirrors we can see what it means to be given a place at the table of God.

I recently learned of the relationship between Abraham and Mary Lincoln and a nurse named Rebecca Pomeroy.² Rebecca had a very difficult life. She and her four siblings grew up fatherless and poor in Chelsea, Massachusetts. By 1860 she was in her early forties and her husband and two of her three children had died. She then volunteered to become an Army nurse and moved to Washington, DC where she was assigned to care for ill and wounded soldiers at Columbia College Hospital. In February of 1862 she was assigned to the White House to help the Lincolns when their son Willie died of typhoid. She became a primary caregiver to a presidential family that was devastated by grief. Mary was incapacitated for many months.

Rebecca Pomeroy was a woman of deep faith who had an unusual ability to respond with compassion to those who are suffering. On more than one occasion, Lincoln asked her to describe how she had found peace with God after losing her husband and two children. He was deeply touched by her story. She would later describe how “tears coursed down his cheeks” as she spoke of God’s love in the midst of her affliction. Mary Lincoln was also helped by Rebecca’s compassionate presence and wanted her to remain with the family on a permanent basis. But Rebecca chose not to stay with the Lincolns. She believed her calling was to serve wounded soldiers and she returned to the hospital.

Rebecca understood the table of God and was convinced the Lincolns would be blessed by visiting the soldiers in her hospital. She believed they could make peace with their own brokenness by

entering into the brokenness of others. The Lincolns could not refuse Rebecca Pomeroy's invitations. On one of their visits it is documented that Rebecca escorted the President throughout the hospital introducing him to surgeons, stewards, cadets, nurses, African-American kitchen workers and the soldiers, especially the ones she described as "lame, halt, and withered." With Rebecca at his side the President grasped every hand and asked for every name. At this table no one was excluded and everyone was blessed.

Endnotes

1. "The Messianic Rule," *the Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, quoted by Patrick Willson, *Christian Century*, August 24, 2010, page 20).
2. Erika Holst, "One of the Best Women I Ever Knew:" Abraham Lincoln and Rebecca Pomeroy, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2010. I am grateful to Caryl Moy for bringing this article to my attention.