

“The Table is Wide”
Mecklenburg Ministries Awards Breakfast 2013
Russ Dean, October 16, 2013

So what Baptist minister worth his salt would pass up an opportunity to preach in a place like this!? You know, a room full of so many (excuse me), heathens! (You know what I mean, “heathens” – there’s a whole table of Presbyterians here!) So my “acceptance speech” is a one-page Baptist sermon. The text, from the 8th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, has become one of my favorites:

When Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came... appealing to him saying, ‘Lord, my servant is... paralyzed... Jesus said, ‘I will come and cure him,’ but the centurion answered, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed... When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, ‘Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ And to the centurion Jesus said, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.

We love to be “in” don’t we? You know, “membership has its privileges” and all that (the right card, the right club, the right creed), but Jesus had another idea altogether. It was not an idea that sat well with traditional religion, but it rocked his rag-tag band of followers, and it still changes the world, one relationship at a time. The religionists in this case were Jewish – but could have been wearing any kind of religious head scarf or vestment. They knew who was “in,” and they seemed to get a little satisfaction out of knowing who was “out,” and saying so. (I’ve met a few Baptists like that, you know.) But Jesus praised a Centurion. A Centurion – hated because he was the oppressor, and an outsider because he represented a pagan world of religious ideas. Jesus said he saw more faith in a Centurion than in all of Israel. His comment was about as offensive that day as standing in a room of Southern Baptist Preachers extolling the virtues of Islamic Terrorism. Think about it. The Centurion. A Roman oppressor (terrorist?). A pagan. (If a “believer” at all.) More faithful than any Jew in Israel. You don’t have to wonder why Jesus got himself killed, do you?

Jesus dared to say the table is wide. God’s table has no boundaries. There are no “insiders” or “outsiders,” except that maybe those who think they’re “in” won’t actually have a seat. At God’s table, they come from East (where the Muslims lived), and they come from the West (where the Romans lived), and they – the faithful – even Muslims and Romans, will gather with the Patriarchs in the Kingdom of Heaven. And it’ll be a banquet to beat even one of “Eloquent Creations” breakfast spreads! The table is wide.

Mecklenburg Ministries invited me to that table, and showed me this beautiful truth. And my friend Rodney Sadler, with whom it is a deep, deep honor to share this award (rather than dividing the award, sharing it with Rodney multiplies it for me!), teaches me constantly how deep and wide and long and high is the Love of God. I met Rodney through a Meck Min program, and ours has been one of the most meaningful relationships in my life. I want Charlotte, North Carolina and this “blue green tiny grain of sand” called planet earth to learn the truth, too. The banquet is just too good not to share – and broadening our tables may be humanity’s only hope.

Meck Min. Thank you. Rodney, my deepest appreciation.

The Table is Wide... May it be so!