

Chapel-Unlearn Week

October 8, 2012

President Michael K. Le Roy

Introduction

In 1988 a college student named Rebecca Skloot attended an introductory biology class taught by Professor Donald Defler, who was teaching on cell structures. He wrote the name Henrietta Lacks on the board and explained that Henrietta was the donor of the cells that had been used for decades to cure polio, learn more about cancer, conduct research on HIV/AIDS, and generally served as the backbone of late 20th century cellular research. Professor Defler told the class that very little was known about Henrietta Lacks, but he explained that cellular research owed her a great deal of gratitude. Rebecca felt uncomfortable about what she perceived as injustice. How could a woman who contributed so much, in the form of HeLa cells for research, be so unknown?

A little while ago I was with some people who asked me why diversity matters at a college like Calvin College. The people who asked me about this are not evil, they care about other people, love Jesus, and also confessed that they are “tired of hearing about diversity.” The reasoning goes something like this: Professors are liberal. Professors at Calvin control the curriculum. Diversity is a liberal political agenda. Therefore Calvin values diversity. This set of assumptions might be true at many colleges and universities, but it is not true here at Calvin. Calvin College’s diversity goals in the academic program are deeply linked to our Reformed Christian faith and our academic goals as a liberal arts institution. In the time I have today I want to tell you three truths about our Christian mission, and finish telling you the story of Rebecca Skloot and Henrietta Lacks.

Our story of the Christian Faith

Calvin College’s missional conviction about the value of diversity, so ably expressed in the College’s document entitled “From Every Nation,” is deeply rooted in the great Christian story whose themes are evident throughout the Holy

Scriptures. The scripture read today bears witness to this value. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ illuminate three important truths that guide Calvin's educational mission to develop inter-culturally competent Calvin College graduates. The story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in the book of John is a powerful text because of what it reveals about Christ's intimate relational capacity with a woman from a different culture. The story read for you today reveals three important biblical truths that form the basis for Calvin's commitment to diversity.

Truth 1: All human beings are made in the image of God. Think about that powerful claim, and then look around you to see God's image in every face. As you look from face to face you will not see two people who are exactly alike. As you look at one another you see the images of God. I look out at you and I see God's artistry and infinite creativity and God made you all and God said: This is Good! My creativity is good. I created beauty and it is good. These differences that God made are part of the design and part of the plan. When Jesus chooses to travel in Samaritan territory and announce to the Samaritan woman that "**everyone** who drinks of this water will never be thirsty again" he is proclaiming that the salvation of Jesus Christ is available to everyone. This is the first time in John's Gospel that Jesus actually says he is the Messiah. The living water Jesus refers to is not water for just the Jews, but it is water for everyone. In these words Jesus is reclaiming all human beings created in God's image, including Samaritans. In Calvin's commitment to diversity we are trying to do the same thing. In our cross cultural engagement requirement we claim that there is another history that matters. The African-American story is different than the European-American story and it is important. If you are African-American you need to see that we value your story. If you are a European-American your knowledge is incomplete if you don't know this story.

Truth 2: Sin entered the world and it corrupted every human soul, and every created thing, including all human relationships. Sin did not leave anything untouched. Because of sin, human beings enslaved one another, believed some races were superior and some races inferior. Human beings created structures and rules that categorized people according to their race, their gender, their

social class, and level of education. Sin has caused humans to ignore God's reality of every human being created in the image of God, and replaced it with a false reality, or what scholars call, a socially constructed reality. In this reality humans make all sorts of rules to preserve the place of privileged groups of people, and subordinate less privileged. Right now you may be thinking, yes, I have heard of this. Jim Crow laws in the south, slavery, but all that is a thing of the past. But if you believe that sin is present and real today you will know that this socially constructed reality is still alive and well. Because we are sinners we have a capacity to think that we are above these problems. We are not racist or sexist. We think we are enlightened, but to say so is to say we have no sin. But we are all in denial about this. If you are white and male, like me, it can be hard to see it because white males in our culture are the privileged ones. I have never walked through a store and been followed by a proprietor because of the color of my skin. I have never been denied an application to rent an apartment and wondered if it had to do with my race. As a male, if I am forceful and determined in my argumentation, I have never had to worry about being called a *witch*, or worse. These are just a few of the examples of the rules that still grant privileges. These unspoken rules are the evidences of sin.

In Jesus' day there were many socially constructed rules that governed the interactions between ethnic groups and between men and women. The woman at the well tells a powerful story of both. What are the social rules in this account? In the interest of time I will name just a few: a Jew shouldn't be caught walking on a Samaritan road; a Jew should not talk to a Samaritan, let alone drink from a cup drawn by an unclean Samaritan; a man should not acknowledge a woman, or be seen alone with a woman of low reputation. The Samaritan woman knew these rules and so she asks, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Jesus knew these rules, and he broke them all. His disciples come upon Jesus and are stunned. You see, some of these socially constructed rules had been elevated to the status of religious rule by many teachers. But in this text we see Jesus walking the Samaritan road, speaking with the Samaritan woman, taking a cup and drinking from her hand.

Liberal Arts Lessons for Diversity

These first two truths, that God creates every person in his image, and that sin has corrupted our souls and our society so thoroughly that we have come to use our differences in destructive ways are essential lessons in a liberal arts college. Before we get to Jesus' message of redemption let me say a few things about the value of these lessons in a liberal arts context. Because they are practical and they should matter to you. Learning to work effectively across differences of all kinds is an **essential** skill for meaningful work in this world. If you do not endeavor to develop your intercultural competencies here at Calvin, you will be at a significant disadvantage. If you want to make a positive difference in the world, you need these essential intercultural skills.

Learning with people who are different from you will make you a better thinker and a better person. Over the course of my own life, I too have thought that I knew what I needed to know about diversity. But in my own diverse work environment, my own failings have been exposed every year. My African-American, Latino, female, and Asian American colleagues have taught me important lessons I needed to learn. I am indebted to them because they have gracefully helped me to see my own blind spots and my privileges. At Calvin College, we are intentionally engineering a diverse learning place for all of you so you can engage in the same kind of learning.

Truth 3: Jesus enters in to this sinful world, and he comes to save our sin-sick souls, and our broken social order. He comes to save us, but he also comes to transform, and heal and redeem this broken world. He comes with the truth that reminds us we are created fearfully and wonderfully in God's image. He comes to tell us the truth about the rules and privileges that we have created that have no place in the kingdom of God. He comes to banish the sins of racism and sexism to hell. He comes to invite you and me into His project: the project of redeeming and restoring this broken world. In the text we see that Jesus does this by staying in the community for two days. This is Calvin College's project: redeeming and restoring this broken world.

The lives of the Samaritan woman, Rebecca Skloot and Henrietta Lacks come together in Jesus' project of saving, redeeming, restoring, and healing a broken

world. Learning and telling the story of a little-known fact about the origin of the HeLa cells in Rebecca's biology class became Rebecca's passion. Rebecca's passion for Henrietta's story became book entitled "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks." That story took Rebecca on a ten year research odyssey. Rebecca learned that Henrietta was a poor African-American woman whose cells were extracted from her in 1951 without her consent when she was being treated for cervical cancer. Her cells proved much stronger than her body and she died soon after her cells were extracted. Her cells were then used by researchers worldwide for the next fifty years before anyone even informed the family of this fact. It is a story of Henrietta and her family, but it is also a story of what happens when a well-educated, well-intentioned people have not developed intercultural competency. This is the story of a family reduced to a specimen and Rebecca Skloot's commitment to telling the story reclaims Henrietta's humanity. In writing the story, Rebecca is saying Henrietta is a child of God that should not be forgotten. In writing the story, Rebecca exposes the sin of racism and sexism among researchers at one of the world's great universities. In researching this story Rebecca spent countless hours with family members in an attempt to tell Henrietta's story. In doing so Rebecca was trying to tell the truth and heal a painful situation for a family who was exploited. She has established the Henrietta Lacks foundation. A portion of the proceeds from her book provide financial assistance to needy individuals who have made important contributions to scientific research without their knowledge or consent. Rebecca Skloot is not a Calvin College graduate, but she is an example of what we hope for in our graduates. As you learn this semester I challenge you to see the image of God in each of your brothers and sisters here at Calvin. If you think you have heard it all before on the subject of diversity I challenge you to listen and learn again. And where you see injustice, I encourage you to act in redemptive ways as you participate in God's kingdom building activity here on earth. May God bless each and every one of you in this task.

Prayer

Lord, we stand in awe of your creativity and artistry found in your diverse human creation. We give you thanks that you chose us to be made in your image.

Forgive us when we construct walls that divide and create enmity. Reveal our blind spots to us and forgive us for our many sins of omission and commission. We thank you that you sent your Son to redeem our broken human relationships. As we go forth this week, let us be your agents of renewal and Shalom. In your gracious name we pray these things. Amen.

Benediction

Go now in peace and may you do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.