

A Memorable Meal with 'Abdu'l-Bahá

“We must lay aside all prejudice—whether it be religious, racial, political or patriotic; we must become the cause of the unification of the human race.”

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke these words in New Jersey, U.S., in 1912, the concept of unity among all races was new. Racial segregation was common. In the South, it was legal to separate schools, buses, parks, and other facilities based on race.

During a nine-month tour of the U.S. and Canada, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave public talks to thousands of people. He shared the Bahá'í teachings about the oneness of humanity and urged his audiences to establish true unity.

At his talk to over one thousand people at Howard University in Washington, D.C., 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, “I am very happy that white and black have gathered together in this meeting. I hope this coming together and harmony reaches such a degree that no distinctions shall remain between them, and they shall be together in the utmost harmony and love.”

One Bahá'í in the audience that day was Louis Gregory, an African American lawyer who was a leader in efforts to build race unity. Louis said the “spiritual atmosphere” during the talk “raised His hearers to a pitch of joyous enthusiasm.” The audience applauded repeatedly as 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke, and long afterward.

Following the talk, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had a chance to put his words into practice. He invited Louis to meet with him at the home of a Bahá'í named Ali-Kuli Khan and his family. Khan, as he was known, a diplomat representing Persia (now Iran), had planned a special luncheon in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's honor. About 19 guests were invited, and some were leaders in Washington, D.C., society or politics.

After the meeting with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Louis, who



Louis and Louisa Gregory married in 1912, when interracial marriage was uncommon.



had not been invited to the luncheon, waited for a chance to slip out quietly. 'Abdu'l-Bahá led the way to the dining room. According to tradition, the seats at the table were carefully arranged based on each person's position in society.

But when everyone was seated, 'Abdu'l-Bahá suddenly stood up and looked around. He said to Khan, “Where is Mr. Gregory? Bring Mr. Gregory!”

Khan immediately went to find Louis and brought him in. Meanwhile, 'Abdu'l-Bahá rearranged the place settings that had been so formally laid out. He put Louis in the place of honor at his right. Louis was the only African American person there. By welcoming him warmly and giving him a prominent seat, 'Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrated that people of all races should be treated equally. He said he was happy to have Louis there, and during lunch, he spoke about the oneness of humanity.

Louis later wrote that 'Abdu'l-Bahá “made everyone feel perfectly at ease by his genial humor, wisdom and outpouring of love . . .” He also said that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's heart seemed to be “a mysterious and boundless treasury of love.”