

*“That God Has Declared Clean”*

As I was studying today’s Scripture Reading about the Star Studiers and the Ephesians Scripture we used for today’s Call To Worship, **I was reminded of the Apostle Peter’s experience reported in chapters 10 and 11 of the Book of Acts.** The conclusion Peter came to was very similar to the basic message found in Paul’s words in Ephesians, as quoted in our Call To Worship, and with the reason Matthew had for reporting the story of the visit by the Star Studiers. Among the things taking place in Acts 10 was Peter’s vision of something like a large sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of living creatures. He was told to kill and eat those animals, reptiles, and wild birds. Many of those creatures were considered to be something a Jew should not eat because they were ritually unclean or defiled. Peter answered he refused to eat them and then in **verse 15, “The voice spoke to him again, ‘Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean.’”** This vision was repeated two more times.

Peter did not comprehend the meaning of his vision, so he sought to understand them. While considering that Peter was called to go to the house of Captain Cornelius, a Gentile. When Peter arrived at Cornelius’ home, he learned the captain had been visited by an angel, who told him to send for Peter. While the apostle was with those Gentiles – non-Jews, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Later in Chapter 11, Peter told the Jerusalem Church what had happened to him. He concluded his report in **verse 17, “It is clear that God gave those Gentiles the same gift that He gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; who was I, then, to try to stop God!”**

It was because of Peter’s experience in Acts 10 that he came to understand God wants All People and not just the Jews to join in the New Relationship with God and the New Life in God’s Son, Jesus Christ! That was a radical change of mind for the apostle. It went against the conventional wisdom and ways of Jewish culture. Peter’s insight was scandalous to the Pharisees, the Teachers of the Law, and the Jewish Religious Institutions. Unfortunately, Christians have, all too often, also sought to limit God’s Love, Forgiveness, Grace, and Relationship to those who deserve it – who are ritually clean. However, as Peter came to understand, **“Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean.”**

After the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, also came to recognize non-Jews were invited by God and Jesus to become members of the Body of Christ, the Church! Paul especially demonstrated this understanding in his Letter to the Ephesians. For example, in Ephesians 3:5-7, 9-10, which we used for our Call To Worship, he made clear, **“The secret is that by means of the gospel the Gentiles have a part with Jews in God’s Blessings; they are members of the same Body and share in the promise that God made through Christ Jesus.”**

One message from Our Epiphany Sunday Gospel Reading is also about the Universal Nature of God’s Self-Giving Love, Forgiveness, and Grace! Its setting is that of the Birth and Early Life of Jesus. The fact the Divine Parent included non-Jews at the beginning of the life of God’s Son in the form of the Visitors from the East – the Star Studiers, is a powerful testimony to God’s Love and Grace being offered to people of all nations, races, and ethnic groups.

Daniel Hazard suggests, “We also have to ask why Matthew tells us this story: that ‘why’ is just as important as the reason the Magi set out on their journey.” **“Matthew wants his audience to hear about the Good News of God’s universal and all-encompassing grace, even if they’re offended or even appalled that such ‘objectionable’ people are included in the story and, even more, are included in the circle of God’s grace.”** Hazard continues, “(Matthew’s audience includes us today, of course, and we have our own outsiders whose presence in the circle of God’s grace might offend us. Or maybe we feel like outsiders ourselves, excluded by others in their understanding of God’s grace.) ...”

Hazard asks, “So, what do we hear in this story? We hear that God has sent a gentle shepherd who will nevertheless upset the powers-that-have-been. We hear that the smallest things, like a newborn baby, can terrify the arrogant, and bring them down in the end. We learn that God’s reach of grace goes far beyond every obstacle within or without, and pushes us beyond them, too. We learn that a great light has dawned, a light that draws all people and calls us to live our lives illuminated by its truth. That’s what the Epiphany season is about: we hear the beautiful words, the promises in the text from Isaiah, about a light breaking forth for all of us who know what it feels like to ‘sit in darkness,’ and we hear the call to arise and become radiant with the light of God.” Hazard concludes, asking, **“Do we in the church shine with God’s love for all?”** (*“Where is the child?”* by Daniel Hazard on Weekly Seeds)

The Jewish authorities did not support Jesus’ Radical Hospitality – they especially detested his implication Jews and Gentiles receive God’s Agape Love and Forgiveness by the Divine Parent’s Grace – without deserving it! They also forgot their Covenant with God included Zion – Israel welcoming others into God’s Blessing. Unfortunately, the refusal of the religious elite to welcome the unclean – Gentiles, sinners, and the outcasts, meant the Children of Israel would not fulfill their Covenant Purpose of being a Blessing to All Nations.

Christians – the Church – the Body of Christ have come to see the task of spreading God’s Love to all people has moved from solely being the call of Israel or Zion to being the call for the Church. Please note the Closing Hymn is listed in the Bulletin as **“O Zion (Christians), Haste”**. Unfortunately our hymnals have replaced the term “Zion” with the word “Christians”. While it may be accurate to say the Historic Christian Church has claimed it has been given the Covenant Responsibility to be a blessing to all nations, in addition to the Children of Israel – Zion, replacing the word, “Zion,” with the word, “Christian,” encourages us to forget the radical nature of God’s Purpose shown in Jesus Christ. **He was sent as the embodiment of God’s Self-Giving and Suffering Agape Love and Grace for All People – both Jews and Gentiles!** As we sing the Closing Hymn using the word “Zion” instead of “Christians” in the first words of that hymn, let’s remember Peter’s experiences in Acts 10 and 11, Paul’s declaration of the Secret of God’s Love for All People in his Letter to the Ephesians, as quoted in our Call To Worship, and how God led and called the Star Studiers from the East – the Magi to come Worship the Child Messiah and King. **Let’s recognize those three biblical Texts convey a radically different message from the prevailing theological understanding and practices of the Jewish people during Jesus’ Public Ministry.** Let us not allow ourselves to fall for the same temptation or to claim and make Christianity another legalistic and exclusive religion, which denies the Universal Nature of God’s Agape Love and Grace.

Today, we celebrate Epiphany Sunday, which is both a time to recall the Star Studiers’ visit with the young Jesus and the day the German Immigrant Founders of this congregation chose to found it 115 years ago! It is, thus, very appropriate for us to respond to the common message of those three biblical Texts and the Birthday of Round Grove United Church, United Church of Christ, by affirming the Truth of Jesus Christ’s Gospel of God’s Agape Love and Grace for All People – Everyone from Every Nation. **Further, let us live out that Gospel of God’s Agape Love and Grace for All People in the way we Love, Invite, and Welcome Everyone with Jesus Christ’s Radical Hospitality.** Amen.