

“Of Sages and Sex Offenders”
Matthew 2:1-12 and Ephesians 3:1-12
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One by one, the acceptable forms of discrimination are falling. Despite the lingering institutional racism evident in the income gap in the US between blacks and whites, record numbers of whites in Iowa just voted for a black man as their presidential candidate of choice. We have recognized the injustice of labeling women “the weaker sex,” a description offered only partly on the basis on physical strength, and a woman is poised to be one party’s candidate for the highest office in the world’s most influential nation. For all the moaning and groaning some do about the language of so-called political correctness, our linguistic gymnastics is generously based on the idea that people should be able to describe themselves, rather than be labeled by others, and so formerly lame, handicapped, or retarded persons who choose not to have their humanity reduced to their limitations seek from us, and have largely been granted, the measure of dignity that comes with using sometimes awkward new terminologies. It seems that there are only a few groups left about whom it is socially acceptable to brutally mock and scorn, among them obese people and those who remain on the welfare rolls, or the dole, as it is called in some places. Oh, yes, and sex offenders.

In the hometown newspapers from where most of you come, there are, from time to time, stories about sex offenders who are moving into town, as happened this

week in St. Cloud, Minnesota. These people, convicted of crimes of a sexual nature, sometimes having to do with children, and having served their time in prison, are required to report to the local police, and the local police are, in turn, required to report to the local community the presence and street address of said sex offenders so that parents can make sure their children do not wander too close and suffer the same fate which landed the perpetrators in jail in the first place. In the interest of public safety, these persons do not have the luxury of leaving their pasts behind and blending into a new community as other released prisoners might, but instead are repeatedly reminded of their sins as the open objects of the fear, scorn, verbal assault, and sometimes violence of a community. Please do not misunderstand me: I am not trying to garner any special measure of your sympathy for convicted sex offenders, but rather I am trying to point up the social acceptability of practicing one type of discrimination while others are on the wane, and to see how Scripture may inform us on the subject of whether, in Christ, those who profess him truly are, as the Apostle Paul tells us in our reading from Ephesians, “members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

I raise the incredibly sensitive subject of sex offenders because there may be no closer contemporary parallel to the feelings of gut-level revulsion Jews had for Gentiles, than today’s citizens have for sex offenders. That the Jewish population was not in a position to be particularly active in their contempt for those outside the chosen people did not change the feelings within. Indeed, the overwhelming force of

the Roman occupation, and the Jewish powerlessness to do anything about it, likely made the longstanding contempt of all things unJewish even stronger. The oft-quoted Jewish prayer which includes the thanksgiving that God created the pray-er neither a slave, a woman, nor a Gentile, while surely making many modern day Jews shudder at its political incorrectness, nevertheless strongly suggests something about the animosity between the two camps. If God's people were clean, Gentiles were unclean. If God's people were chosen, all others were un-chosen. Certainly, this was not the iron-clad position of either all Jews or all Gentiles, but it was the prevailing sentiment, back in the day, and it provides us with some context for Paul's exhortations to his new Gentile converts, as he is reminding and assuring them of their equal status with those who formally considered themselves the only and true heirs of God's blessing and favor.

Of course, this issue about Gentiles is pretty important to most of us, seeing as how we don't come from the Jewish side of the family. The vast majority of Christians today are quite grateful to Paul, and the other wise men, the Magi from the east, for opening to us the doors to the kingdom. This is what we celebrate on Epiphany Sunday, the eye-opening experience had by the Magi, the first of the unChosen people to meet Jesus, and, incidentally, the first financial donors to the cause of Christ. The rather sanitized version of this story we recall on Three Kings Day obscures the pretty radical and scandalous nature of the event; not only were these guys Gentiles, but they were astrologers, a far cry from either the Old

Testament Prophets or the Scribes of Jesus' time. These were not people to be taken seriously either politically or religiously, and Herod probably mocked them as soon as their backs were turned. It is no wonder he sent them on ahead to find the child instead of escorting them himself, as one would do if one were really interested in paying one's respects; Herod, a semi-legitimate king at best, would not have wanted to undermine his stature even further by being seen to give any respect to these sages from afar. That's why he "secretly" called for the Magi to interview them for their spying mission. As it happened, Herod's fear of the prejudice against Gentiles caused him to miss the birthday party, yet another reason to celebrate Epiphany, for the Manifestation, the unveiling, the revealing of Christ to the Gentiles might have ended right there in Bethlehem if he had gone along on that trip. Be that as it may, the scandal of Gentiles seeking and, we may safely assume, being blessed by Jesus, would not be an easy thing for Matthew's audience of Jewish Christians to take.

Which brings us back to the thorny issue of including people generally understood to be un-includable, the most challenging example in our own time being convicted sex-offenders, but if we are honest, all sorts of people who do not conform to our expectations as social acceptable. It is the rare homeless person who can find a place in a church except when the church's soup kitchen is open, and although alcohol and drug addicts may use the church basement for recovery meetings, they rarely make it upstairs for worship. It is not for the lack of desire to worship God that the extra thirty steps are not taken from one section of the church

building to the other, but rather the fear of being ostracized. This is why most churches tend to be quite homogeneous, economically and socially, no matter how diverse the demographics of their communities. And yet, as Paul tells us, it is to be “through the church [that] the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places,” the wisdom of God that sees through differences and practices no type of preferential treatment and includes *even* the most scandalous, fear-inducing, and even life-threatening elements of society, say, Roman soldiers in Paul’s time, or sex offenders in our own, who have found themselves drawn to the star at its rising and who have experienced “the mystery of Christ, [that the whole world has] become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the Gospel.”

I am well aware of the statistics about the numbers of people sexually abused as children, one girl in three and one boy in four, and equally aware of the statistics about the very high recidivism rate of convicted sex offenders. I am familiar with the pain of those who have been victimized and the victory of those who have survived and overcome it. I am NOT paving the way to break it to you that there is a convicted sex offender in our congregation, although the sad odds are that there may already be an unknown and unconvicted one who calls ECF home. What I am saying is that the challenge to our compassion and openness presented by even the idea of welcoming an outcast as thoroughly despised as are the sex offenders of today is not a new challenge, but rather one that presents itself in every generation

of faithful churchgoers who find themselves face to face with those who are different or threatening. The issue, however, is not whether or not to extend grace to those who are different, for that is God's job, but rather how to practice the grace God has already extended to sinners of all stripes, ourselves included. You see, the star the magi followed was not just an astronomical phenomenon, but a divine one: God's initiative and God's invitation to the strangest characters imaginable to experience "what has now been revealed to God's holy apostles and prophets by the spirit." It was God's invitation to the Gentiles, not Paul's, that they should come to experience the "boundless riches of Christ." But it was Paul's challenge to the church to *practice* the grace God extended by living together in a common witness that reveals the mystery and issues the invitation in an ongoing way. If, as Paul reminds us in Galatians, "in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free," we had better be about the business of eliminating any other distinctions between those whom God loves equally.

As I look at the story of the magi, outsiders who gave gifts to the Christ child, I wonder if all such outsiders who seek Christ, even convicted sex offenders, don't also bring gifts of great value, if we choose to recognize them as such. Many churches that have chosen to tackle the immensely complex and painful subject of welcoming sex offenders, that have taken advantage of the unlikely opportunity God placed in their midst, have experienced hard-earned but profound blessings. Not only have they experienced a deeper understanding of the mystery of things like

forgiveness, but they have also opened up incredibly important conversations about taboo subjects like the prevalence of sexual abuse, and the sexualization of children in the media. As difficult as it may be to imagine God placing a star over a church for the purpose of leading a convicted sex offender to lay the gift of their experience at the altar, could you put it past the mischievous God who led astrologers from the east to Jesus' manger bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh? Would not any parent gladly trade the suffering of their child for an uncomfortable conversation or two?

I know it seems like a stretch to go from sages to sex offenders, but if the grace of God is to be experienced in its fullness, it will be found in the most challenging of forms, not the easiest. If we are to live Epiphany, the revelation of Jesus Christ to the whole world, rather than merely celebrate it one a year, it will be because we trust in God enough to venture into ethically murky and emotionally charged issues to see what God may be leading us to learn from uncomfortable encounters. Paul reminds us in his closing words that God's purposes are "carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence in faith in him." May God help us to rely on that boldness and confidence when confronted by what challenges us most. Amen.