

What's in that Napkin, Anyway?

By Sheryl Stewart

Scriptures: Acts 11: 1-18 Revelation 21: 1-6 John 13: 31-35

Summary: What God makes clean, we must not call profane. What in the Universe does it mean to be universal?

Stephen Hawkings has issued an interesting challenge. He wrote: “You may see two scientists quarreling but one will eventually say, “That is an excellent argument! My former position was mistaken.” After that, research continues but you never hear that old position again. This doesn’t happen as often as it should because scientists are human and don’t like to admit they are wrong, but this happens all the time in science. I have never seen this sort of behavior in politics or religion.”

I am not any expert on politics, but Acts 11: 1-18 documents a clear example of this evolution of belief within the early Christian church. The earliest church was Jewish. Within this group, “the party of the circumcision,” held that one cannot be fully a Christian until one is fully a Jew. Other believers, represented by Paul, Barnabas, Luke, John Mark and other evangelists to the Gentiles, felt that God offered atonement to everyone through faith in Jesus.

It took Peter to present the transforming argument. Peter described his vision of the napkin filled with unclean animals. He did not want to eat them and make them part of himself, but God told him: “Don’t call anything common which I have made clean.” He was told three times; so, he could not miss the point that he was denying Jesus – again. Then, he wakes up to Gentiles at the door asking to hear the Gospel! When he visited their house, he preaches, they believed, and the same Holy Spirit he experienced at Pentecost fell on these Gentiles. Much like Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch, Paul could not see any barrier to baptism once God had so clearly included those previously excluded.

The party of the circumcision remarks in amazement, “So, God has also granted the Gentiles repentance unto life.” In other words, “That is an excellent argument. My former position was wrong.” That reversal is why we descendants of pagans are here worshipping today.

This leads me right to an historic cornerstone of the UCC: ecumenism. We do not merely spread Christ’s invitation “that they all may be one,” to those who do not yet believe; also, we seek to join hands with factions and divisions among believers. Congregationalists, the Christian Alliance, the Evangelical, and the Reformed fellowships united. Today, Western New York is a leader in fellowship with the Disciples of Christ.

Our present will be our children's history soon enough! What, or who, is in my "napkin descending from heaven?" What group do I wish I might never have any part of?

Alas, the beam in my own eye is obvious. The people I would not wish to include are the very people who refuse to include me. The same Holy Spirit is offered and given to those who'd like to nail their sanctuary doors shut against me. It is hard to be inclusive of other sheep when they keep insisting that I'm a goat, and a scapegoat at that. This brings me to the one point of doctrinal tension between myself and my brothers, Don and Jim.

I'm sure they will say that I, all these other sheep, and any goats that may be butting heads in the mix are universally embraced in the saving arms of Christ. I agree, but, I, the girl raised in the ecumenical UCC, differ in that I hold that we are all *offered* universal grace, but that salvation is a two way conversation in which both sides say, "Yes."

The Gospel says *Now* is the acceptable year of the Lord. God says: "Yes, Come without price." Jesus paid that price; so, we say: "Yes, just as I am, I come, I come!" But, what if we don't say, "Yes?"

Universally offered and universally effective salvation are very different from "universal salvation." Jesus thanks God that He won them all

except “the one of whom it was written in the Beginning would be lost.” Whether that is Judas or Satan himself, one exception is not universal.

If the sheep are really saved and the goats really lost, that is also not universal. If Malachi is right and the feet of the redeemed will walk on the ashes of the wicked, there is a real, second death – an ending to evil if it is not converted.

That gives urgency to evangelism and ecumenism. The old hymn says, “Rescue the perishing,” not, “Rescue those who will be saved regardless.” I perish without grasping the lifeline of Christ. I perish trying to walk on the troubled waters alone. God cries, “Why will you perish, my little children? Turn from your evil ways and live! (Ezek. 18:32)”

So, hard as it is, because I don’t think “universal” includes the unconverted (whether believer or not), I will say, “Yes,” to God *and* “Yes” to any brother or sister who claims him, whether or not they claim me. I just pray for the grace to do *that* universally, and I pray that you all will join me. Amen.

Shedding light on the Hymn today, “Let the Lower Lights be Burning”

"Let the Lower Lights be Burning." is an old, Baptist hymn which is loved by many, but do you know what the lower lights are? The lighthouse warns ships away from the rocks; so, it is a good symbol for God's love and mercy that warns us away from the rocks of sin which can wreck our lives . Yet, in a bad storm, ships may be blown into the rocks anyway or there is human error; then the ship sinks and you have sailors in lifeboats or just swimming in the storm.

Where do they go? They can't head to the lighthouse; that is marking where the rocks are! That is where the lower lights come in! Back in town, the church bells ring out emergency and people run out to the beach with firewood, mattresses, gasoline, matches, lanterns and what all. They make many bonfires and other lights along the shore. Without that,” some poor sailor, tempest tossed, trying now to make the harbor, in the darkness may be lost.” You are the lower lights. You are an essential part of God's plan for salvation!