

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Epiphany  
6 January 2019

“Outsiders In”  
First in a sermon series entitled “Inclusivity Matters”

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6  
Christian Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12



# Epiphany

As many of you know, I am a bit of a feminist. Many of my sermons have focused on the great admiration I have of women. As many of you know, though there are many exceptions, I feel men (in general) are often very wanting. I include myself in this evaluation. I wish I was as wise and benevolent as the average woman. So as we reflect on our story of the three Wise Men, I ask: ‘How would the story be told if it had been three Wise *Women* instead of three Wise *Men*?’



Well, first, the women would have asked directions not been at all lost. Because of that, they would have arrived on time. Being on time, they also likely would have helped deliver the baby. They probably would not have been able to keep themselves from even tidying-up the stable. They would have thought ahead of time, cooked and brought meal. And last but not least, they would have at least brought some practical gifts.<sup>1</sup> What is a baby going to do with gold, frankincense and myrrh?



With our narrative from Matthew's gospel, I welcome you to the season of Epiphany.

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# Epiphany

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Epiphany Humor, 4 January 2013.  
<https://didntmakethesermon.wordpress.com/2013/01/04/epiphany-humor/>

Here are a few fun facts with which to impress your friends at the dinner table: Epiphany is always twelve days after Christmas. Hence, Epiphany always falls on 6 January. The word ‘Epiphany’ has Greek origins and the root word in English means ‘to reveal’. So, an ‘epiphany’ is a realization, usually sudden. So, it is quite common to use the term in a secular context. For example, one can say, “I just had an epiphany that I am actually as good looking as I am brilliant!” An epiphany is an ‘A-ha!’ moment. It is when something ‘clicks’. Something is excitedly understood.



For Christians, the Epiphany story of the three Wise Men reveals Jesus as ‘God with us’ (Emmanuel) and this realization is made known to Gentiles, non-Jews, those who were not ‘favored’, outsiders, those who were not considered a part of the Abrahamic covenant.

In this sermon series entitled ‘Inclusivity Matters’, we focus on the fact that throughout the Hebrew scriptures (and increasingly so in the Christian scriptures), it is revealed that those who think they are

‘in’ are possibly very much ‘out’ and those who are ‘out’ are actually likely ‘in’.



For example, in the Hebrew scriptures, Jonah despairs that the Ninevites, arch enemies of God’s Chosen People, are included in God’s salvific plan. Our scripture reading read from Isaiah states that “nations will come to the light of God”, who Christians interpret to be Jesus, the light of the world. So, it is not just the Hebrew nation, but *all nations* are intended to be included in the Kingdom, or the Realm, of God.

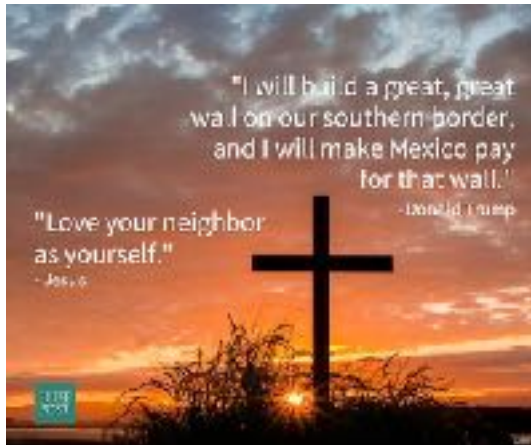


The theme ‘those who are out, are in’ accelerates in the Christian scriptures - but with a twist, not only ‘those who are “out” are “in”’, but ‘those who are “in”’, are, more often than not, “out”’.

During the course of Jesus' ministry, who is 'in'? Children. Who is 'out'? Scribes? Who is 'in'? Women? Who is 'out'? More often than not, men. Who is 'in'? Adulterers (through repentant). Who is 'out'? Pharisees. Who is 'in'? Roman soldiers. Samaritans. Lepers. Who is 'out'? Sadducees. (That is why they are so sad, you see?) Jesus turned the socio-political and theological world upside-down. Who is 'out'? The King of the Jews. Herod! Who is 'in'? Wise Men from the east, pagans, Gentiles, magi from the east, most likely Zoroastrians.



Friends, in this past week's *The Reformer* I read an interesting article (I actually have time to read the paper when I am on leave). The article focused on the motivation behind white conservative evangelical Christian support for the funding of a physical wall along the Mexican/United States border to keep-out 'undesirables'. While I do not wish to comment partisan politics, I think the dynamic of insiders and outsiders is interesting as we examine our gospel message.



The article states: “For white evangelicals who see the sun setting on white Christian dominance in the country, the wall is a powerful metaphor. [...] this metaphor embodies a white evangelical view of the world ‘as a dangerous battleground’ made-up of ‘chosen insiders and threatening outsiders’, as well as an ‘embattled minority trope that is rooted deep within southern culture’ [...].”<sup>2</sup>

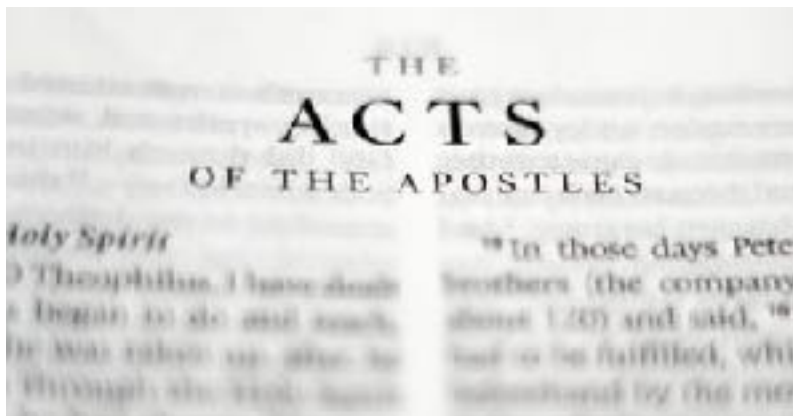
Friends, Matthew included the story of the three Wise Men to demonstrate that those on the outside are included in God’s salvific plan and those on the inside are often the last to recognize and foster this inclusivity.

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Sargent, “As the Walls around Trump Crumble, Evangelicals May Be His Last Resort”, *The Reformer* and *The Washington Post*, Thursday, January 3, 2019.



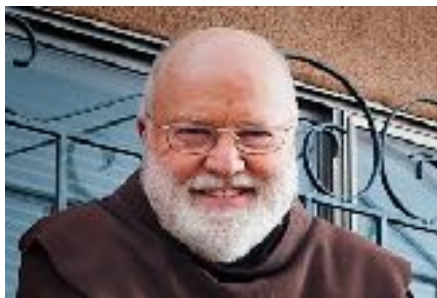
Herod, the ultimate insider, was the ‘King of the Jews’ who desired to eliminate what he perceived to be a threat. And it was the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the scribes who wished to keep-out women, keep-out adulterers, keep-out lepers, keep-out the poor, keep-out the Samaritans, and keep-out the Gentiles.



Friends in Christ, this insider/outsider theme continues into the book of Acts and into the letters of Paul. Who is included? Who is excluded? Those who aren't circumcised? Those who eat unclean meat?



Friends in Christ, this theme continues today. Who is ‘in’? Heterosexuals. Who is ‘out’? Homosexuals and transgenders. Who is in power? White male Christians. Who is newly elected? Black, Somali, Muslim women. Who has a right to live a better life? United States citizens. Who is ‘out’? Hondurans, El Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Mexicans.



A recent daily devotional by Father Richard Rohr states that at the forefront of Jesus, Paul and other early faith leaders’ “consciousness was a belief that God is leading all of human history somewhere larger, broader and better for everyone. Christianity cannot be bound by ethnicity or nationality. This puts it in essential



conflict with any group that wants to domesticate the message for its own ‘patriotic’ purposes”.<sup>3</sup>



A central theme of our scriptures, and in particular the story of the three Wise Men is that those who are ‘in’, more often than not keep those whom God includes, ‘out’. And those who are ‘out’ are often the first to recognize, hear and obey the gospel of Jesus Christ: Women, the poor, the sick, foreigners, aliens, Gentiles. *Outsiders in.*

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, the people of God responded, “Amen!”

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation, Week One: “Jesus: Modelling an Evolving Faith”, Patience, Friday, January 4, 2019.