

Epiphany 1A  
Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17  
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## United in Christ

We've begun a new church season. Epiphany marks the end of Christmas and a shift from focus on the Nativity, the birth of our Incarnate Lord Jesus, to new manifestations of the reality of our living God.

Last Friday was the Feast of the Epiphany, and if we had come together for Eucharist we would have read about the Magi, the three kings, and their journey to Bethlehem to honor Jesus, the Anointed One. This event represented the first story of the recognition of Jesus by the Gentiles.

And today, the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany, we have another manifestation of God's anointed one with the Baptism of Jesus. Matthew's gospel tells that Jesus came to John at the Jordan River as part of the crowd asking to be baptized, and we hear an interesting encounter between these two cousins, as John questions why Jesus is coming forward to be baptized by him.

But this interaction prompts me ask another question. Why does Jesus ask to be baptized at all? Why does he go through a baptism of repentance that he doesn't need with all the others who are following John? He tells John that it's in order to fulfill all righteousness. Fulfill all righteousness. It's a churchy-kind of phrase, not one that fits into our everyday language. But what if we heard these words in a new way: as "right action," or perhaps, as the "right thing to do." Could that help us better understand what Jesus is doing and why?

Perhaps Jesus was publicly aligning himself with his cousin, creating a sense of solidarity with John the Baptist's message. Or perhaps he desired to perform some sort of public ritual, as he begins his own ministry. These are valid and important reasons for Jesus to come to John to be baptized.

But I see another possibility for Jesus' actions. I perceive Jesus' desire to show us, in a clear and concrete way, his deep desire to stand in solidarity with us and all of humankind. The one who was without sin, humbly joins with the multitudes at the river Jordan, and publicly submits himself to both his identity and his vocation. Jesus is consecrated in the waters of the Jordan, immersing himself, literally, in our humanity. and through this selfless act of obedience to God, he initiates his ministry.

As soon as Jesus rises up from the water, there's a reaction from our Almighty God. The heavens are opened, creating a new divine and human connection, as the Spirit descends, blessing and empowering Jesus. Our gracious Lord and Savior will use his divine power throughout his ministry, not to lord over humankind, forcing all to align to his will, but instead to heal the broken with gentleness and to seek out the bruised and suffering, wherever they are, with compassion and hospitality.

Jesus hears the voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I'm well pleased." God recognizes Jesus' right actions, this right thing to do, and accepts this expression

of commitment, by audibly expressing God's own love and Jesus' chosen-ness as the Beloved Son.

Jesus stands with us. He sides with humanity, fully participating in our human lives. Jesus doesn't separate himself from the messiness, the ugliness, or the cruel side of humanity, doesn't place himself above others, or sacrifice compassion and charity to keep his power, but walks with us, with all of humankind. Jesus welcomes all.

Peter, in our Epistle reading, reinforces this idea of Jesus standing with all of us, accepting all who do what is right in him. Here is an amazing message of inclusion, particularly if look at this text within its context. This passage of our lectionary is beginning in the middle of the story. Peter has seen a vision that encourages him to open himself to new possibilities: first, to perceive that it is now acceptable, in Christ, to eat foods that are not pure; then, to open his heart to the idea of accepting an invitation from a God-fearing Gentile, the Roman centurion, Cornelius, and visit his household — both acts forbidden by the Law.

As Peter meets with Cornelius and his household, he comes to understand that God shows no partiality for one group of people over another, but rather that all who worship God and do what is right are acceptable to God. As Peter shares God's message of peace through Jesus Christ, he witnesses that the Spirit fell on all who heard God's word and poured out from them all. And although it's not part of today's reading, the very next verses express Peter's wonder that the Gentiles had received the Spirit, just as the Jewish Christ-followers had on the Day of Pentecost, and Peter baptizes all of Cornelius' household in Jesus' name.

In baptizing Gentiles or eating forbidden foods, Peter wasn't simply setting aside social customs, but stepping beyond what he had always believed was enshrined in the Law. These practices were the ways to live life righteously in obedience to God.

But something had changed. In Jesus, the rules are redefined and reinterpreted — what had once defined the people of God is now different. In Jesus, righteousness and right action, is re-aligned into a new communal life of hospitality, compassion, and inclusion. As God's people, we are all encouraged to step away from our human tendencies to become insular, to getting caught up in defining who's in and who's out, and instead understand that we are all united in Christ.

God shows no partiality. All are acceptable in him. Jesus stands with us all, as we are all beloved children of God.

This week I saw the movie *Hidden Figures*. The film tells the inspiring story of three African American women whose work was crucial to NASA in the early 1960s, a time when racial segregation was still the law and gender discrimination the norm. The story centers around the work in the early days of the space race, and the challenges leading to the launch of astronaut John Glenn into orbit. The movie is based on a wonderfully well-written non-fiction by Margot Lee Shetterly that documents the little known lives of so many unsung black women heroes who lived their lives in hope and helped to change the future.

There's a marvelous exchange in the movie that captures both the smart and subtle message this film delivers about the truth of race relations, both past and present. One of the main characters, Dorothy Vaughan, is an effective "acting supervisor" who's been in the job for

months, but having trouble achieving the actual promotion, title, and pay raise she deserves, in spite of repeated appeals to her manager. At one point, Vaughan's white female boss say, "Despite what you may think, I have nothing against y'all." It's the kind of thing many of us may say or think, when we want to avoid realizing that we may actually carry even the shadow of racism's taint within us. Vaughan's reply is genuine, without a hint of sarcasm: "I know you probably believe that."

Where are we stuck today? What are our deep-seated beliefs that separate us from others, those deeply-ingrained cultural norms which actually need to be broken apart and exposed to the light of Christ? These things that divide and label, that create fear and isolate us from one another — things like race, religion, gender, socio-economic status, sexuality, gender identity — these things can also separate us from God, for God shows no partiality. All are acceptable to him and Jesus stands with us all, as we are all God's beloved.

Soon we will baptize Jackson Samuel Paul, son of Henry and Rachael, initiating him into the Body of Christ. With his parents and sponsors, we will all reaffirm our own baptismal covenant and our promises to live out our communal lives as Christ's disciples, seeking justice and dignity for all of humankind, by serving Christ in all persons and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Those things that divide us, that keep us apart, are washed away in baptism. For in baptism, we are born again, united in the hope of salvation in Christ. Jesus leads us to recognize the power of love, humble obedience, vulnerability, and hospitality, pointing us back towards the way that God had always intended for us to live: as a people committed to fulfilling all righteousness, a people of right action who bear fruit through proclaiming in word and deed the Good News of God in Christ. Our Lord and Savior blesses all people and all nations through the everlasting Spirit of God's infinite love. Amen.