

Epiphany Sunday
Jan. 2 & 3, 2016

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“You have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for your benefit, namely, that the mystery was made known to me by revelation...that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.” (Eph 3:2)

This statement caused a lot of consternation in the early church. Even between Peter and Paul, this was reason for a tussle over this radical change. Paul was teaching the Gospel to Gentiles and welcoming them into the Christian Community when only those who were first Jewish by culture and religion had been followers. Perhaps Peter and the resisters from the early Christian communities had forgotten that the three magi who brought gifts to the new born Messiah were Gentiles, we pagans. These astrologers were from the East, from Mesopotamia which is now Iraq, Persia, which is now Iran, and Arabia which includes Kuwait, Bahrain, and Yemen. How about that!

On Sundays I usually read the comics as if they were dessert at the end of a meal. But one poignant comic gave me reason for pause. In the first frame the 3 magi are on camels following the star. In the second frame the light of the star is shining right on them. In the third frame they are met at the wall of Bethlehem with large poster that has the word “foreigners” with a big line through it. The last frame is three rejected, dejected magi going home without getting into Bethlehem.

A week ago we celebrate the birth of a child, Jesus, who was not allowed to be born among the notables because there was no room in the Inn. Another group of those not accepted among the ordinary folk are the lowly, rejected shepherds who were guided to the Messiah and now these foreigners from the East. These wise strangers are the forerunners of all those who make their way to Jesus. What does this say to us at a time when we are batting down the hatches, closing our borders, restricting those who pass that once welcoming Statue of Liberty? Isn’t it timely that this is the National Migration Week when the Bishops call us to reflect on the plight of migrants and refugees?

Jesus came for everyone. There is a difference between knowing this and acting on behalf of everyone. God comes for the losers, the rejected, and the person in the 10 item checkout line who has 25 items. God loves the driver who fails to signal a left turn. God loves the grinchers, too. God loves those at our nation’s doors; those working minimum wage jobs; those living in substandard housing. How can we love them too?

What are we, the hearers of this Gospel called to do? We, like the Magi, are called to seek the Lord, adore the Lord, bring our gifts to the lord, and then go home by a different way. We are to seek the Lord in one another. We are to adore the Lord by reverencing all created life. We adore God by creating unity. We bring gifts to the Lord when we give mercy, healing, and love. We must be willing to give to anyone in need, no matter where or what part of the world that need comes from. We go home by a different way because once we love we are changed and our eyes are open to new directions.

Pope Francis has called upon us, the church, to make this a year of many epiphanies of mercy. Scripture scholar Carrol Stulmueller reflected on this feast wrote: “Are there still strangers in our lives, people from whom we would never want to receive a gift? Then there ought to be an ache in our heart and a feeling that our family is still missing some of its members.” Are there still people in our lives to whom we have not given mercy, care, and forgiveness. That babe who we celebrate gave US a light to follow: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36)

We have a checkered past regarding how we have treated our brothers and sisters. To quote writer Joan Chittister: “The true Native American history is still to be resolved. And it is true that many of those who don't want to accept the immigrants of today had no trouble accepting the fact of slave ships of yesterday.” And over seventy years ago, Jewish refugees escaping Europe on the S.S. St. Louis were denied entry into the United States because of xenophobia and the anti-immigration policies at the time. The passengers, mostly families, were sent back to Europe. Over 250 of these men, women and children were killed in the Holocaust. Today, more than 50 million human beings are fleeing war and violence in their homeland. In Syria alone, over half the population has fled the violence in their country with the hope of finding refuge in other lands. The people of Canada chose to act out of compassion rather than fear in welcoming 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of March.

How do we act? With the fear of Herod? Do we allow fear to cripple us and to justify hatred? Do we allow fear to cause us to act in a manner that may lead to the death of other human beings? Or do we act instead as the Magi, seeking the One who transcends all fear?

What kind of God reveals God's Self to strangers, aliens, and those we just don't trust? The same kind of God who shows God's self to us and says: “now go, and show ME to others in the way you love.”