

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon – January 8 2017**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**  
**“Otherhood”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

Who is a Gentile for you?

Last Friday, January 6 was *the Feast of the Epiphany*. We are now in the season of Epiphany, which lasts until the beginning of the season of Lent on the first day of March.

The word, “epiphany” means “manifestation” or “revelation.” For Christians, *the Epiphany* denotes one particular revelation: “the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.”

Christ first appeared to the people of Israel. When the baby Jesus was born, he was born into a Jewish family. Tradition assumes that the shepherds who came to worship the baby Jesus were Jews.

But tradition also claims that when the three Wise Men came from foreign countries in the East to worship the infant Jesus, Gentiles were for the first time in the presence of the Messiah.

Now it’s easy to misunderstand the word, “Gentile.” We might mistakenly think it refers to members of a certain ethnic or national group. We might think that “Gentiles” are like “Asians” or “Canadians.”

In fact, though, the term only can be understood *in contrast to* the people of Israel. Hebrews customarily referred to all non-Jews as “Gentiles.”

It didn’t matter whether a person was a Roman or a Spaniard or a Persian. If she wasn’t a Hebrew, then by default she was a “Gentile.”

Now one way to think of the term is to see it as signifying what sociologists call, “The Other.” “The Other” for me can be any person who isn’t a member of the groups that I myself identify with.

The Gentiles weren’t members of the Hebrew “tribe,” so they weren’t regarded with the same familiarity and intimacy and comfort that a fellow Jew merited.

If I wanted to, I as an old, white, American Protestant could regard lots of folks as “other”. That’s because they are in different categories than I’m in: the young are “other” than I am. Persons of color are Other; citizens of Russia are Other; followers of Islam are Other. There are lots of people I could consider to be not members of my “tribe.”

Given the events of last year, we could also mention how people are put into opposing categories by *politics*. For many supporters of Hillary Clinton, those who voted for Donald Trump are like members of another tribe—just as for Trump supporters, those who voted for Clinton are very difficult for them to understand.

In fact, the way people are categorized these days can make almost everybody else into some kind of “Other.” The groups that I belong to seem to distance me from people who are in different groups. It may be impossible for me to find a kindred soul--someone who checks all the same boxes that I do.

So many categories. So what should we do about the divisions these classifications create? How can we break down the barriers? Today’s Scripture suggests one answer.

The Psalm for today that we said earlier refers numerous times to “*the voice of the Lord*.” For example, the text says:

“The voice of the Lord is upon the waters...  
The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice;  
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees...The  
voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire; the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness...The  
voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe and strips the forests bare.”

And the Second Lesson we heard gives a dramatic example of the voice of the Lord. After Jesus is baptized, the text reports, “a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

I wouldn’t pretend to understand this extraordinary event. After Jesus was baptized, he seems to have had an experience of God giving divine approval of his calling. From that moment on, Jesus knew that he was meant to bring to the world the good news of God’s Kingdom.

The Psalm and Christ’s experience of the divine voice remind us that God speaks to every one of us. The Gospel is for all of us--wherever we were born, whatever our backgrounds, whatever we have achieved or not achieved in this life.

“The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;” every person who listens to God can hear him speak. There is no category of person excluded from the divine invitation.

And while any communication from God will by its nature be mysterious, it’s surely possible that God will “speak” to us in some way. Assuming that there is a God: wouldn’t God want to communicate with us? What would be the point of God creating us and then leaving us on our own, with no contact with our Creator?

Now I don’t believe that God speaks to ordinary people in the same dramatic way that he spoke to Jesus. Jesus after all was unique; his unique life merited unique attention.

But I do believe that God is able to communicate with us in various ways.

And one way he speaks to us is through the ways we communicate *with each other*. We learn God’s will for us as we talk with other humans—including people in different categories from us.

Suppose that I realize that I have said something unkind and insensitive to an acquaintance. In that case, God will give me a chance to repair the damage and change my ways for the better.

Then of course God also speaks to us in unusual events. Those occasions we call “coincidences.” Even what seems like bad fortune can turn out to be good in the end.

A friend moving away can force you to seek out new friends whom you wouldn’t have otherwise met. God can even speak to us in the voices of people who are in quite different categories from us.

It’s worth remembering that Christianity spread so quickly throughout the ancient world because it wasn’t a tribal religion. You didn’t have to be born into the correct in-group to follow the voice of the true and living God. All those Gentiles were welcome to join the Jewish Christians in their new religious movement, a movement dedicated to the Way of Jesus Christ.

And on this day when we hold our Annual Meeting of the parish, and as we begin a new calendar year of work together, we can give thanks for each other—each *Other*. We can give thanks that we are all one family in Christ Jesus.

At Incarnation, there are no “Gentiles!”

*Amen.*