

In the beginning

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, January 7, 2018.

In the beginning,,,God said,"Let there be light; and there was light." Genesis 1:3

Epiphany is a word most of us don't normally use. The church season of Epiphany is about the manifestation of the light of Christ coming into the world of darkness. It is the revelation of the full nature of God in Christ. The first of the epiphanies is when he presents himself to be baptized.

Let's go back to the beginning. The opening line in the creation story in the book of Genesis reads, In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...then God said, "Let there be light, and there was light.

The African American poet James Weldon Johnson wrote a book of poems entitled, God's Trombones. In his poem, The Creation he describes the creation of the world:

And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said;
I'm lonely
I'll make me a world.
As far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in the cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said, "That's good!"

This church season of Epiphany is about how God acts in the created world. God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is no ordinary man. He enlightens us with God's mercy and forgiveness born out of love for all creation. The light shines in the darkness for us to understand what is difficult to comprehend.

God is well pleased when Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit at his baptism in the river Jordan. It is by our own baptism that we are made worthy of belonging to the community of faith. Baptism in the time of Jesus was an act of repentance. While infants are without sin, the emphasis for adults in Christian baptism is on being cleansed of our old life of sin to live a new life in Christ.

When we think about some of the values and attitudes with which we were raised, most of them are good, but others we may find no longer acceptable. You may have had certain assumptions and stereotypes regarding people based on their color, origin, religious tradition, gender, sexual orientation, or on their economic, political and social backgrounds. Like many others, I had to evolve in my understanding beyond the monochromatic world in which I grew up. It was a personal epiphany

for me to realize that we can't make assumptions about people based on appearances. I came to understand and admit that none of us could claim to be free of prejudice. If you've ever had the experience of being a minority where you live and work, you had to come to terms with assumptions and prejudices you never realized or admitted that you had. The best way to evolve from our old assumptions is through education and personal experience. The barriers that divide us are broken down when we are completely honest with our selves.

We are not in a position to judge who is and who is not worthy of God's love. Responding to the call to serve God begins with breaking down the walls that separate us to advocate for the oppressed living in cultural and religious ghettos. God accepts us as we are while expecting us to grow into someone better than we were.

We have been taking a good hard look at ourselves during our parish's strategic planning process. Whether or not we continue as a viable, healthy and gospel-centered church depends upon getting beyond our maintenance mode to having a mission to the world beyond us. If we are really going to be a spirit filled community we have to take seriously our baptismal promises. It begins with the realization that we are all one in the sight of God before whose table we kneel to seek redemption and renewal. We learn the difference between good and evil, right from wrong, and to love and respect other people, as we want for ourselves. It means striving for justice and respecting the dignity of every human being

When Jesus presented himself to be baptized in the Jordan River, John the Baptist protested. He claimed that it was not necessary for the sinless Christ to undergo a baptism of repentance. Jesus insisted on it not because of any sin of his own, but because he wanted to identify with us by entering fully into the human condition. Jesus invites us to be fully immersed into the life of sacrificial service. The call to follow him is the call to service, not lip service, but genuine sacrificial service. As God approved of Jesus being baptized, so each of us must seek God's approval in our vocations as servants of God.

Growing in the knowledge and love of Christ is more a matter of the spirit than of the intellect. Anyone who has children knows how perceptive they can be about spiritual things, more than we are willing to give them credit. We can't make assumptions about what they perceive. With regard to children and the Eucharist, what is foremost in their minds is inclusion. They should not be excluded because we think they don't understand. I sense their excitement as they kneel at the altar with their family to receive Jesus in the bread and wine. That's all they need to know and that is essentially all any of us needs to know.

It is good to renew our promise to be an active part of the church as the community of believers in Christ. We are all children of God, but there is an essential difference between having a child-like faith and trust and being just plain childish. It is with a child-like faith that we are incorporated into the life of the Christian community trusting in the wisdom of God to guide us in the right way.