

Children of God  
Matthew 2:1-12  
Epiphany Sunday  
1/5/19

The Biblical story reminds us repeatedly that we are children of God. Humans are created in image of God, which is one of the basic markers of children. They bear a resemblance to parents and not just because of physical genetics – children are images of their parents by the way they learn to think, by mannerisms they copy, by habits they acquire. Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke of God as father.<sup>1</sup> David addressed God as father.<sup>2</sup>

While the Old Testament figures may have thought of God as father in a metaphorical sense, Jesus in the gospel addresses God as father in a personal sense. He taught his disciples to do the same. The early church understood this as a literal invitation into the family of God, an enfolding into the arms of Father and Son made possible by the Holy Spirit of God that was active in the church.

The message is clear that we are children of God, but we often forget it or we fail to grasp the depth of love that is offered us as children of God. Sometimes we forget this because of our hardness of heart – just as earthly children reject the love of their parents, mistakenly thinking they can find love in other places. Sometimes we fail to recognize God's love because of wounds from our earthly relationships. These wounds can happen in our families of origin, but other relationships of trust can also harm us deeply.

The traditional language of God as father can be hard for some to connect with because of abuse caused by an earthy father. If the traditional language was mother, or even if the faith did a better job of lifting up the female images of God that exist in scripture, there would be others, although perhaps fewer, who would struggle. Even the neutral, parent, may not be approachable for some. Almost all of us will find places we struggle to understand God as Father, Mother, Parent. As loving and as caring as our parents might be or as wonderful as the other key relationships of trust are in or life, they are flawed because we are finite and sinful humans who will fail to love ourselves and love others.

One purpose of the incarnation was to show us the power of a truly, loving parent. As Protestants we tend to focus on how Incarnation and Atonement are linked. The manger becomes a foreshadowing of the cross. But we need more than just a lifting of the burden of sin. We need love. We need to know what love is. We need a relationship where love is unconditional. We need a relationship where there is true mutuality of interests. We need a relationship where we can be honest and the Other can be honest with us. We need a relationship where this is presence, commitment, and faithfulness even in the midst of pain and sin. We need true and real love.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 63 and Jeremiah 3.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Chronicles 29

“Love divine, all live excelling. Joy of heaven to earth come down.” God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son.

The incarnation shows humanity that there is Someone who would do anything and everything to show us what love looks like. Our wounds from broken relationships of trust can find healing in the one true relationship of trust: a Parent, a Father, a Mother in the deepest and most intense sense that our limited human language can express.

That’s incredibly good news. But both Matthew and Luke recognized that a problem quickly arises. This is not a problem with the fullness of love coming to earth, but with what we do with this gift. We gladly receive the good news that God has come in the fullness of love, claiming us as children, but then we immediately set boundaries around it. We decide this is good news we must closely guard. We decide we only need to share it with those who look like us, act like us, believe like us. Luke dealt with this by telling how shepherds were the first to receive the news. The shepherds were a marginal and sometimes outcast group in society. The shepherds’ invitation to the manger is a reminder that the good news is for everyone from the rich and elite to the poorest and the marginalized.

Matthew has a different story to tell and a different answer to this selfish holding of the gift of God’s parental love. The first persons in Matthew’s story to recognize that something amazing was happening in the course of human history were a group of star gazers from another country: Gentile astrologers, to be clear.

These visitors being Gentile might have been a stumbling block to many ancient Hebrews. While the prophecies about the messiah including blessings of the nations were recognized, the people like us tended to only focus on the parts of the prophecies that provided comfort – like delivering people from oppressors, like the Romans.

Amazingly Matthew, most scholars believe, wrote his gospel for a largely Jewish audience – disciples of Jesus who were faithful and practicing members of the Hebrew faith. Was the first reading of this story met with surprise or anger? Or was there understanding because many of them had been forced out of their communities because of their claims that Jesus was the Messiah?

The astrologer part of the descriptor might be the stumbling block for many of us. We might try to dress it up and tell ourselves that these ancients were what passed for astronomers of the time, but the fact is there were widespread beliefs among many people that events in the heaven could predict events on earth. And for some, they even believed in a causal link, that events in the heavens influenced events on earth. While a comet has been proposed to explain what happen, just as likely, and perhaps even more so, is a near conjunction in the right part of the sky of Jupiter and Saturn and the resultant astrological interpretations that arose. We good educated Christian folk and we good Bible believe Christian folk don’t really like to think of astrologers as being the first ones to be invited to this party where all are claimed as children of God.

God is inviting others far and near to come and experience the incredible love of a wonderful parent, come and experience inclusion as children of God. They won't look like us. They won't have to have the same customs as us. They won't speak our language. They may have gotten directions from someone we despise. They may not believe the right stuff. Their journey to recognizing the inbreaking of God's incredible Love in the world might have included all sorts of experiences and ideas that we wouldn't recognize as Christian. Doesn't matter. God has sent an invitation across all those barriers to others inviting them to come.

The importance of this story for our own time is great. Thanks to global travel, the internet, and worldwide media, we can encounter people like this wandering magi from the east in our everyday lives. It might be exposure through something we read or something we view. Or it might be our new next-door neighbor or a co-worker. It might be the addition of a family member from another culture, which is becoming more and more common. They will have amazing stories to tell about their journey. And we might be surprised to find that they are the very people who can show us the true and healing love of God.

Epiphany is an invitation. We are invited to come and worship like those first travelers. That same invitation is extended to others, even those very different from us. There is plenty of room for all for we are all God's children. By receiving that invitation and welcoming others, we will discover the true Father, Mother, Parent of us all who bringing us a perfect and healing love. Amen.