

**Sermon: "Here Comes Everybody" Epiphany Sunday      Text: Matthew 2:1-12**  
**January 7, 2018      Rev. Steve Clifton - Rideau Park United Church**

The author James Joyce once described the Christian church with this phrase: "Here comes everybody..." The Church was, even in his time, an inclusive mosaic of people. Where else did people of different class, background and economic ability gather together? If it was true that the church was "everybody" in Joyce's time, it is more true now. Globally the Christian church is very large and very diverse; it holds a couple of billion people worldwide. It includes people of every language, social class, race and ethnic group. Across the church people worship quite differently from place to place, from one tradition to another. They organize themselves in great a variety of ways. The Church is an eclectic mix of peoples and of styles and practices. To describe the church in the world we might say with Joyce: "Here comes everybody."

With our focus being on our part of the world and the church in the West, on our own congregation ... we may not have an accurate picture of the Christian community in the world.

We may think that our faith is in decline, and in the secular cold belt of the Western world it may be true, but globally the Christian church has never been bigger and it is exploding with growth at an unprecedented rate

Go back about a hundred years. The global Christianity of 1900 was largely Western, European, from the Northern Hemisphere. Today there are more Christians living in the global South than in Europe and, North America combined. Roughly two-thirds of all Protestants live outside Europe and North America.

One hundred years ago about one in ten Africans was a Christian, and there were about 100 million Africans, so 10 million African Christians. Today, almost every other African is a Christian, and Africa has more than 700 million people. Christianity is the largest religion in Africa and is growing rapidly. There are 400 million Christians in Africa compared to 220 million Christians in North America.

One hundred years ago Europe was the Christian heartland. In the next few years, sub-Saharan Africa will be the heart of the Christian world. Africa will be the second largest Christian region in the world in a short time.

Number one, the biggest Christian region, will be Latin America...Central and South America

The third largest region of the church will be Asia. There the church is also exploding with growth. The largest Presbyterian Church in the world is not in Scotland but in South Korea. The largest Christian congregation in the world is not a famous American Mega-Church like the Willow Creek in Chicago or Saddleback in California but is the Yado Full Gospel Church in Seoul South Korea. Their General Board of deacons and elders has 100,000 members. (Imagine a

meeting. Imagine taking minutes...)

The fastest growing Christian community in the world by nation state is also in Asia, in Communist China where more than 2.5 million people come to the faith each year.

And the global church is young. Globally the average follower of Christ today is under 20 years old.

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Our own denomination is found only in Canada and yet we too are a diverse church.

The United Church is known, as a denomination, to be inclusive and tolerant. We allow for a great deal of theological diversity, a wide range of liturgical expression. And we reflect the global church as a denomination. At a United Church meeting in the Montreal a few years ago one could hear English, French, German, Filipino, Korean, Italian, Hungarian, Mohawk, Arabic and Armenian spoken or sung by United Church people. Our church too could be described by the phrase "here comes everybody..."

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We celebrate on Epiphany Sunday the coming of the Magi to find the Christ child. Jesus was born in a Jewish province to Jewish parents. His coming was anticipated in the Jewish tradition.

But then come the Magi. These learned men lived far from the Jewish homeland. They were raised in another tradition and language and culture. These travellers come from the land beyond the distant Euphrates River. To the people of Judea, of Bethlehem, to Mary and Joseph these Eastern visitors would be foreign, strange even.

These men come to find a child whose birth was proclaimed by the heavens. They come to see what God has done, not just for the Jews, but for all the world. The heavens proclaim the news of Christ's birth to everyone who can look up and see, wherever they are. God signals the good news to the whole planet and in the wisemen and their journey we see the world recognizing the significance of this birth. The Gentiles come to see him who is born king of the Jews. Jesus is born and here comes everybody...

The magi come bearing gifts. The diversity of the Christian community, globally is a great gift

Peter Rollins, the Irish philosopher says that the strangeness of the other is always a great gift. When we see people doing things in a way that is foreign to us, it helps us to see that we have our own peculiarities. It helps us to realize that our ways are not the only way and that others might be puzzled by what we see as normal.

Some years ago we had a Lenten series on Judaism, to understand better our Jewish neighbours. Professor Jonathon Wouk was one of our speakers and he commented on his

experience of the United Church and mentioned the first thing he found strange about us- the length of our services. We start and end on the hour. We meet for 60 minutes and beyond that we look at our watches and get fidget in the pews. From an outsiders perspective that`s unusual. Jewish services, Christian Orthodox liturgies – people come and go and the service may go on for hours. In some parts of the world Christian worship takes much of the day. From the perspective of others we are weird... preoccupied with punctuality and time.

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I knew a young man who, in his twenties, went to church for the first time in his life. He was attending a funeral. For him it was like a visit to a strange new world.

There were people dressed in long white robes. They sang music that was like nothing he had heard before. They sang together- who does that? There were candles burning on an altar and banners with symbols he could not understand. And they spoke words the meaning of which he didn`t know. And people read and sang from strange books. Sometimes the one from the outside help us to see ourselves in new ways.

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In her book *The Rule of Benedict: Insight for the Ages*, Joan Chichester, herself a Benedictine nun, reflects on one of the great classics of Christian spirituality. The rule of St. Benedict is an ancient and profound code designed to help Christians as we live together in community.

Benedict`s rule includes instructions. The monks were to pay considerable attention to the entrance to their community. The Rule recognizes that there is always a temptation to keep our doors closed, to try to keep things as they are, to try to keep the community safe and controlled within its own walls; outsiders can take up energy, make us change the way we do things, disrupt our familiar patterns and practices. Benedict`s rule gives clear instruction on the importance of opening the door to new people, to the unknown stranger on the threshold, to strange visitors from afar. Joan Chichester explains the need for an open door in this way: “the message [to the one who comes to our door] is clear: Come on in and disturb our perfect lives. You are the Christ for us today. Come in and disturb our perfect lives. Show us other ways. Receive those, who do things in a way we find strange or surprising, those who help us to see ourselves, our traditions and peculiarities in a new way.

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In Epiphany we celebrate that the whole world comes to Jesus; the magi are the first to come from afar. In Epiphany we see God`s desire to come to the whole world, to make the whole world welcome at the manger. Can we live open to the world, to the new people that God invites to come in and join us, to the gifts they bring?

Here comes the world. May we make the world welcome, be open, see the diversity of the Church in the world and the possibility that it brings to us. In Christ`s name, Amen.