

### **3 Epiphany A 20 good**

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalms 27:1, 4-9

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

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Grace and peace to you from Jesus, the light of the world. Amen.

And so the work continues, right here, right now, with us. We are fishing in a modern world, in our own sea of people, problems and beauty. With the words “come and follow,” the invitation of Christ comes to us this morning, beckoning us to come and see and experience what a life with God is all about. There are no guarantees of an easy way, no bonus paycheck for good performance, no layoffs if you try and fail.

What I am referring to is the work of ministry, of sharing the good news of God’s grace and inclusion. A message that has countered the ways of darkness and discrimination since the world was created. A work that has seen prophets, blue-collar workers, homemakers, young and old alike participate. God really gets it, that we’re much more likely to come alongside of something if we are part of it.

And so God calls us. And that calling isn’t a one-time thing, but a continually evolving process of learning, listening, discernment, correction as we try to understand the limitless grace unfolding all around us. Most of the time, to be honest, we simply don’t get how expansive it all is.

But, for us here at Holy Spirit, we have taken chances, betting on this gospel of grace, to become a community of affirmation for all. And while we might say it a little differently today, our Welcome Statement is a broad welcome to newcomers and a meaningful reminder year after year to us all.

When I was interviewed for this call, I was repeatedly asked about where I was on this journey of welcome. It was a good thing, because “welcome” often means different things to different people. The Call Committee that day was safeguarding this ministry. That was seven and a half years ago and I have learned much along the way.

When I was still a pretty green pastor, the issue of inclusion was just beginning to surface. One of my professors, Erwin Buck, had written a daring booklet for its day, called “Six Studies in Homosexuality.” And so people were talking. In my heart I knew that God loved all, but then there were these troubling passages in the Bible that I didn’t know what to do

with. And there was a long and foundational history that seemed clear on the place of “gays” (which is was the word used then) in the church.

And so I wrestled with this, because I wanted to be a faithful follower of Christ. One day, I was on a chairlift with Pr. Bill Bulger in Jasper and we were talking about all this and I commented how every time I debated in my own mind about it, I kept falling off on the same side of the fence. He said, “so, stop getting back on the fence.”

Point #1: To my CIS friends today, it's OK to wrestle with this. Don't be too hard on yourself for that. But, Pr. Bill was right, if we just keep circling around to the same debate, we never move forward. We never enter the journey to “come and see” that includes a rich serving of love and growth for us all.

Secondly, inclusion is a journey. We are learning here in our church family, just what a journey this is. Very clearly it is not a destination, but a commitment to be together as God's family into tomorrow. Interestingly, this version of Matthew's story speaks of God's *kindom* not kingdom. It's not a typo, but a very intentional way of saying we are all kin, family. The first seeds of openness that were planted in this church back in the late 90's struggled through many challenges before they blossomed into the vibrant welcome we proclaim today. Seven years ago we didn't know about different pronouns, we didn't employ anyone from the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, we hadn't yet officiated any same-sex marriages.

So yes, inclusion is a journey and like the disciples who first left their fish nets, we don't really know what lies ahead, but we dare to step out knowing we have the best guide possible.

As we hear from the prophet Isaiah today, we heard a small part of a story of a people who desperately longed for freedom. The Israelites were living in captivity, slaves to foreign masters who dictated every movement of life. Who wants to live like that? Who wants to be told they are not worth the freedom God gives? That's why the work of inclusion is so desperately needed. There are too many competing messages out in the world that tell us, and especially the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, that we are not worth love, not worth welcome, not worth a place to share of ourselves. In this ministry we learn that we need diversity, we need people not like ourselves. To our LGBTQ2SIA+ friends I say thank you. Thank you for taking a chance on Holy Spirit, for taking the risk to open yourselves yet again to the possibility that you may be accepted. I know that is hard, because so often it ends up not being true. Thank you for sharing of yourselves, being yourself and for helping us grow and change with you.

This is my third point today, we need each other. We need the transforming power of Christ to mold us into a new people who are willing to cling to the deep power of love that teaches us "all are welcome, and all means all."

The people walking in darkness are seeing a brilliant light! May we continue to trust in a God who loves us like this. Amen.