Sunday, January 5, 1986
THE INCLUSIVE CHRIST
Matthew 2:1-12

Tomorrow, January 6, is traditionally known as the 12th day of Christmas, and on the Christian calendar, it is known as Epiphany, which means the "showing forth." Epiphany commemorates the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus.

Before the Wise Men arrived, the celebration of the birth of Jesus had a local setting and an entirely Jewish atmosphere. Jesus had been born a Jew in Bethlehem, the city of David, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The shepherds who came to the manger were undoubtedly Jewish people living in the area.

But now, with the visit of the Wise Men from another country, the Bible story is telling us that the birth of this baby named Jesus has implications not only for Jewish people but for the whole world. The star in the sky can be seen by anyone who wants to see it. The visitors who bring the baby gifts from another country recognize that a unique event has occurred in relation to all of creation and all human beings. The Wise Men represent the fact that Christ is for all people everywhere. The birth of Jesus is an inclusive event, not an exclusive one.

Christ is so inclusive that he will not fit into the mold of any religious system. In that sense, Jesus is unorthodox. He does not fit many of the preconceived notions of what the Messiah would be like. A baby born in a stable to an unmarried woman? That's not the way important people are expected to enter the world according to our view — very unorthodox!

A young man growing up in Nazareth? No one important had ever come from Nazareth. Again, very unorthodox! People asked in Jesus' time, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Certainly, that town had never been remarkable for anything in the way of religion. It had never produced a great man, a prophet, a spokesperson for God. It is never even mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible at all, which means that it hadn't any notable religious and historical associations. It was just a little country town — no different from many other country towns. But where we are born, or where we grow up, has little to do with what we make of ourselves, or even more so with what God makes of us.

Once Jesus began his public ministry, even John the Baptist, who had preached about the coming of the Messiah and had baptized Jesus, had second thoughts about his inclusive, unorthodox ways. "Can this be the Christ?" asked John. Jesus included everyone in God's love. Most religions tend to become exclusive — but not so with Jesus. John the Baptist was so puzzled that he sent some of his own disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the sick, the blind, the lepers are made whole. The dead are brought back to life; and the poor, the outcasts are no longer ignored." Everyone is included in God's community!

Jesus was asking John the Baptist to consider the quality of his ministry even though it was unorthodox from John's point of view. It was help for the helpless, concern for the lonely, love of the outcast, healing for the sick, and companionship for the suffering. The love of God became a human being and dwelt among us — that's very inclusive and very unorthodox from our point of view.

Even though we often try to remake Jesus so that he fits our preconceived idea of what the Messiah should be, it doesn't work very long. His economics, from either a capitalist or a socialist perspective, are a scandal. His teaching on non-resistance to evil is hard to swallow. Love your enemies — that's very unorthodox.

The Messiah dying on a cross like a common criminal — again, very unorthodox from our usual point of view. We believe the strong are those who fight back. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek."

The love of God became a human being and dwelt among us, but how unorthodox his appearance. He is all love and graciousness — all tolerance; he blesses all who are not against him. His love is inclusive, not exclusive. He does not bludgeon us. He calls us and draws us to him in full obedience.

But as we come close to Christ, we see again how inclusive and therefore how unorthodox he is.

So we are attracted to this inclusive yet unorthodox Christ, and we are also repelled by him because he calls into question our own exclusiveness — yet we are attracted to him again, for in the final analysis, we have nowhere else to go. He alone has the words and works of eternal life. He alone can give us the peace that passes all understanding. So like the Wise Men, we worship him.

This morning, on this first Sunday of the new year, the inclusive Christ invites us to his table, and all are invited. Your beliefs do not have to be correct. Your life does not have to be perfect. Whatever your condition — you are invited to Christ's table. "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Amen.