



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
January 7, 2018 Sermon

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## From East and West, South and North” Overcoming Binary Oppositions

Scripture Lessons: Galatians 3:23-29

“Wise men” is the usual translation of *magi*, the Greek word used for Jesus’ visitors. Because three gifts were offered (gold, frankincense, and myrrh), three magi—Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar—have become the tradition, with each representing a different part of the known world at that time—Europe, Asia, and Africa. But eventually they came to represent all people the world over.—*The Gifts of the Magi*

So on this day, when we commemorate and celebrate Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the whole world in his birth, we also receive the Body and Blood of Christ in his holy and blessed Sacrament, and thus have another Epiphany, another Christmas day, another manifestation and application of Christ to ourselves.—John Donne

Here’s the word of the day: binary, b-i-n-a-r-y, binary As in . . .

**binary code** in computer programming, a language consisting entirely of only two variables 0/1, so that you get long, long chains, e.g., 0000011001, etc; or

**binary choice** in logic, game theory, and economics, any choice between two opposite and mutually exclusive alternatives (on/off up/down, in/out); or

**binary opposition** in theory of language and literary theory, that the meaning of one term or concept depends upon, and entails some understanding of, its opposite and mutually exclusive term (good vs evil, summer vs winter), with one term often being accorded (implicitly or explicitly) a position of superiority, privilege, over the other.

**Binary opposition** . . . as in contemporary American society: red state vs. blue state, Fox News vs MSNBC, MAGA vs. DACA, Sean Hannity vs. Stephen Colbert.

**Binary opposition** . . . as in the changing face of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* You know the premise: the young adult child brings home—for the first time—that one whom he or she is really serious about . . . and who—what— that one turns out to be not only surprises the parents but also challenges their world view:

Whispering in the Kitchen: “My God . . . he’s a . . . he’s a . . .”

“Shhhhh!! they’ll hear you! . . .”

“Why didn’t she tell us? I mean, I’m a very open-minded person . . . she could have told us, could have warned us. What will the neighbors say?”

“Shhhh!! . . .”

“I try to be open-minded but my God, he’s a . . . he’s a . . . [louder] Republican?!?!”

*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?*: at times in the past, the whispering’s been about racial/ethnic identity, or religious belief, or sexual orientation, but now . . . now, well, consider this: In 1960, only 5% of those surveyed said they would be “upset” if their son or daughter brought home a prospective spouse of the “wrong” political party. Today, it’s about 45%. And that’s the 45% who are willing to admit it—my guess: the real number is much bigger.

Are we doomed to binary opposition? That is, are we doomed to defining ourselves and dividing up the world in binary terms—us vs. them—with only the terms themselves changing—our present Republican/Democrat red/blue division being only the most recent manifestation—but the general binary way of understanding ourselves and our world—the binary opposition of us vs. them—always staying the same, always defining us?

Before you answer, “Of course not,” consider: there’s a lot of evidence to that says we are, most of human history in fact. Some say it’s built right into us: According to some evolutionary biologists and psychologists, the only thing that enables us to rise above selfishness and violence on the individual level is . . . selfishness and violence on the group level. “Groupishness” one psychologist calls it: where we identify profoundly with a group—find our individual identities in it—with our group, “us,” always being identified in opposition to some other group, “them.” On this view, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world up into some kind of binary opposition . . . and nobody else.

And you don’t need Darwin or evolutionary theory to see this. Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver’s Travels* more than one hundred years before Darwin’s *Origin of The Species*. Having been shipwrecked, Gulliver finds himself between two tiny islands—a mere 800 yards apart—each with its own tribe of tiny little (they’re about six inches tall) people—the Lilliputians and the Blefuscueans—two peoples divided by, hating each other over, in fact, at war with each other over . . . over . . . well, over which end of an egg you should crack. The big-endians believing you must crack the egg only at the big end, whereas the little-endians . . . well, you get the picture. As Gulliver puts it:

*Six rebellions have been raised on this account; one emperor has lost his life, and another his crown. There are always civil commotions, constantly fomented by the monarchs of one or the other island; and when they are quelled, exiles always flee for refuge to the other. It is computed that eleven thousand persons have at different times suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but the books of the Big-*

*endians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of holding employment.*

My God, he's a . . . he's a . . . a big-endian?!?!

Which is not to say, however, that all differences alike are so trivial or insignificant:

*Good morning: this is your pilot. Before we push back from the gate, I want you to know that, on this flight, there is no east or west, no south or north. Flight attendants prepare for takeoff.* Now, I want you to know this: I'm getting off this plane.

And there are more serious examples: To dismiss race as trivial or insignificant because it is a mere "social construct" ignores the history of suffering, struggles, and triumphs, and blinds us to the continued effects of racism on us, our society, and our world.

Differences—whether innate, cultural, or both (and unraveling all that is no small task)—differences matter. In fact, many differences—all the real, God-ordained ones (all the things that make each of us unique), I would argue—are beautiful. A world with no differences is no world at all, and certainly a world without beauty. Differences matter, and some differences matter greatly to what happens to us, the kind of people we become, and the kind of lives we lead. Matter greatly, but not ultimately.

Ultimately, it's not our differences that define us, as much as we might try to make some of them do so. Ultimately, it's God. Ultimately, it's not us vs. them that defines us, it's that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. That's what defines us.

You see the relationship between God and us, between God and humanity, is not one of binary opposition . . . although it might seem that way at first: It might seem that divine/human, heavenly/earthly, immortal/mortal eternal/temporal are opposite and mutually exclusive terms with one accorded (implicitly or explicitly) a position of superiority—privilege—over the other. But that was never true, and Christmas makes that clear.

What Christmas makes clear is that God comes to us in friendship to overcome our binary opposition, both our binary opposition to God and all our subsequent binary oppositions to one another. We have put ourselves in opposition to God, claiming the privilege of saying ultimately who's who, what's what, who's in and who's out: us vs. them. But that was never what God wanted, and Christmas makes that clear.

That's why it's important that those wise men in Matthew's Gospel, who follow the star to bring their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus, who come to worship him, who have their epiphany—their experience of the manifestation of God on the twelfth day of Christmas—that's why it's important that the wise men are Gentiles. The difference between Jew and Gentile is not ultimate: it matters, matters greatly, but not ultimately. And that's why it's important that, to the early church, the wise men come from all the known corners of the earth: all those binary oppositions that we accord so much privilege to—including those of geography, ethnicity, and race—are not ultimate. There is no longer Jew

or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female . . . there is no longer Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, big-endian or small-endian . . . for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

The binary oppositions we set up as ultimate are overcome in the friendship of Jesus Christ. And so we must be friends with one another. That's why it's important that we come to this table today . . . because it is here we find Jesus, the friendship of God, for our epiphany.

People will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God . . .

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.