

Mystery No More
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Ephesians 3:2-13
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In our passage today, Paul reveals what he says is the great mystery of the faith – but let me tell you, you’re likely to be disappointed at first. It won’t satisfy our immediate desire for something fresh and new and exotic.

Our tendency is to want something religious that is mysterious, exciting... exclusive. We want to be part of the mysteries and have the riff raff kept out.

But if you’re able to hold on past the apparent anti-climax of this mystery, I think it will be a lot more profound and life-changing than the cotton-candy mysteries our human nature wants.

Let’s hear about the great mystery of the faith from Scripture:

Ephesians 3:1-13

In this passage Paul keeps circling around the great mystery of Christ’s work. In verse 3 Paul says that this mystery was the very stewardship of God’s grace given to him for their sake. In other words, this

mystery is a grace that God allowed Paul to hand over to those he was writing.

In verse 4 he again refers to this as *the* mystery of Christ that was not made known to the sons of men in other generations. The mystery is a bit of a surprise to us in that the mystery isn't that Jesus is Lord of all or that God is Triune or that Jesus purchased our salvation by his blood. Not that these things aren't mysterious and weren't revealed to us by Christ, but it is not *the* mystery Paul refers to here. The mystery that Paul says is *the* mystery of Christ is: "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

The mystery is that the mission of God is a cosmic mission, a universal mission. That's it right there. The whole enchilada: the mystery of God is the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. The mystery is that all along the purpose of God wasn't just to save people from one people group, no, the purpose of God was to save people from every people group, to make a new group of people for himself, and that they would be knit together as one glorious display of his radiance – they would be the very display of himself.

Now for us this is easy to get, or at least we think it is. But I want us to take a step back and hear the mystery through the ears of those who first heard it: those first century Jews.

Who loves the Olympics? I love the Olympics. Just love them. Get wrapped into the whole thing – the stories, the pageantry, the obscure sports... all of it. I just get completely frozen by the whole thing: entranced by the spectacle. Because of some human interest story, I find myself cheering for kayakers from Botswana like I'm cheering for my sister. And I don't know anything about Botswana or kayaking.

They have the formula down. The first thing they're going to do in a telecast is explain the sport to you. I mean, the average American doesn't know a thing about kayaking or the individual medley or fencing or judo or badminton.

I mean, we all kind of know what these things are. We've played badminton at a family picnic or two. By the way, my spell-checker showed me that I didn't even know how to spell the word last night. It's spelled bad-mint-on. From that family picnic we all basically understand the rules: hit the birdie over the net with the racquet. Don't let it hit the ground. We get it, right?

But we flip on the Olympics and realize the game that they're playing is a whole lot different than the game we played with our cousins at last year's reunion. The rules are different, the players are finely tuned athletes who have invested thousands of hours into the sport, forcing their body to embody the sport in a way that mocks the weekend free-swinging badmintoner. The idea is there, but it sure looks different than anything we would have suspected.

That's the mystery of the work of Christ. It isn't that those hearing didn't have any categories for what God did through Christ. I mean, they knew through the Old Testament that God was a God whose plan was to bless the nations through Abraham. Other places in the Old Testament speak of the nations worshiping God through Israel's witness.

The idea was foreign in the same way Olympic badminton is foreign to that reunion-goer. Or that Olympic fencing is foreign to me, a wrapping paper roll with my kids fencer. The basic concept is there, but man does it look different.

The Jews kind of knew all along that God wasn't just about them, but the intrusion of God into their world and then the revelation that the work of God in this world was not only not just for their political salvation, but not for their salvation specifically... that was a mind blowing revelation.

In my sermon a few weeks ago on Ephesians 2, I mentioned that Paul made up words there to talk about us being united with Christ. Paul does a similar thing here, scrunching together words to emphasize the togetherness of Jew and Gentile in the new race of God's people.

In Ephesians 2, Paul used the words "together with" to drive home that what had happened in Christ had happened in us. We have been "raised up with Christ" and "seated with Christ" in the heavenly realms. Paul carries that idea through here, except now he is driving home the fact that because of our togetherness with Christ, we are now together with one another.

In chapter 3:6, with three words, Paul drives this identity home. He says that Gentiles are "co-heirs" (that is, we have the same Daddy), "concorporate" (that is, members of the same body), and "co-sharers" (we share in the same promises). And all of this, of course, is through Jesus Christ.

Can you imagine this through a first century Jew's eyes? The Gentiles? What do you mean the Gentiles are co-heirs, concorporate, and co-sharers? How is it possible that God could allow the Gentiles in on our promise?

And do you realize what this means for us? We, who had no stake on God's kingdom and no relation to his children have just received the golden ticket.

Bill Gates just moved into the neighborhood, invited you over for dinner and told you he's going to adopt you and name you an heir to his estate. You, who had nothing to do with Bill Gates before other than using his computer products and reading about him in the newspaper, you're now his child!

We, who once had no claim on God are now named heirs of God, children, members together of one body with his chosen people. Through Jesus Christ we have received double union: with God and with each other. What a mystery!

And yet, it's my hunch that this revelation doesn't hit us with the same oomph it should. Where's the mystery, we say? Of course God loves everyone! That's about as mysterious to the 21st century Christian as saying that God created the world. Wow! What a news flash! God loves both Jew and Gentile?!

But, despite our how comfortable we are with this mystery, we may miss the depth of the mystery of this revelation. What is truly profound is

that God has revealed something incredible about himself through this mystery.

The revelation is this: our God is a missionary God. That is, our God is a God who has sent from himself a missionary to the earth: his Son, Jesus Christ. God the missionary – that is, Jesus Christ – came here for the lost sheep, and to, through his death, bring about a new race, his race. A people brought out of every nation and tribe to be his people.

Let's remember who Paul is: first and foremost Paul is a missionary. Sure he's a Jew, sure he's a trained Pharisee, sure he's a Roman citizen, sure he's a tentmaker. But in his own mind he was first and foremost a missionary.

In verse 7 Paul says that it was “of this gospel” that he was “made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me by the working of his power.”

And Paul says that this is grace. What is this grace? It is the grace of being a missionary. Paul is so humbled by this call that he literally loses words to express his sheer and utter delight in being called in this way. He says he is the “leaster” – it's not even a word – the “mostest leastest” of these. Paul's identity is so bound up with his calling as missionary he

exhorts his readers: “Don’t be dismayed by me being locked up right now! It’s a joy! It’s a privilege! It’s a confirmation of my calling!”

In Acts 21-22 it records Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem: how he ended up in the prison cell from which he wrote, actually. It is the longest speech of Paul recorded in Acts. Because he is a Jew he is permitted to make a public defense at his tribunal. In an uproar, the Jewish crowds quiet down as he begins to talk and remain quiet as he tells the story of his conversion. For 21 verses Paul tells the story to the quiet crowd. But at the point where Jesus said to him, “Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles” – at this point they explode in anger and shout, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!”

So, what led to Jewish opposition to Paul was his bold, uncompromising espousal of the Gentile cause. He not only preached his vision of the new and undivided humanity and wrote about it; he was at that moment suffering for the very truths he was expounding.

Paul understood who God was and that changed who he was. God met Paul on the Road to Damascus. Jesus Christ, the missionary, converted Paul. The mystery of what God’s doing: bringing Jew and Gentile together as one reveals a marvelous mystery about who God is. God is God of the nations; and God is a mission-oriented God. God is missional in his

movement – the inward life and love of the Trinity is always moving outward to capture those God loves. Paul is a missionary called by a missionary God.

And Paul's word to us is this: we are called into a new community and that new community has a profound new identity. We're not a group called to isolationism and protectionism and in-growth. No, we're a group whose identity is to move out into the world and spread the word. The identity of the church is a missionary identity.

Go! And as you're going, make disciples. That's what the body of Christ does because that's what Christ did and does. We are Christ's body on earth inasmuch as we are being the body of Christ – being missional, being missionaries.

Let me make a side comment about the word missionary. The term missionary has fallen on hard times in the past few years. Three developments have made its usage nearly obsolete in anything but evangelical circles.

The rise of secularism was the first development to make the term missionary a questionable term. Anything religious took on a negative

connotation, and so missionary became suspect. If you were a missionary, you were a pushy proselytizer, someone who forced others to believe in your out-of-date beliefs.

The second development was the awareness of America (and the West's) colonial impulse and a move into the Post-Colonial age. This development critiqued anything that America did to exert its nationalistic impulse on other nations. In many ways the critiques of America's missionary efforts, particularly of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were justified. Were we converting people to America or to Jesus? To Capitalism or Christianity?

The final blow to the term missionary has been the deterioration of Muslim-Christian relations in the past decade, particularly in the West. This has done two things: 1) it has increased Muslim suspicion of Christian missionaries; and 2) it has given the secularists a hand up in labeling all who proselytize as "fundamentalists" or worse, "radicals." This has obviously negatively impacted both the idea of having missionaries and the term itself.

But despite all of this, I put forward that we need to reclaim this word. In fact, I would advocate that we use the word more broadly instead of narrowly. We are the missionaries of God. To be a Christian is to be a

missionary, it is to be part of a missional community that is always headed this way: out, out, out.

The church's purpose is to bring about a reconciled new humanity that is a display of God's wisdom and power, a showcase of his glory. God's wisdom is made manifest through our community life, through our fellowship, and through our movement.

In Ephesians 2 we saw that humanity in Adam is fragmented, divided, warring, full of hostilities, bitterness, and strife. But in the church God is creating a new beginning, a new humanity, a new community. There is a harmony, a unity, a community in the church which is the beginning of what God will do for the whole cosmos. God's plan still includes just one family: but instead of Abraham's family; God's plan now includes Adam's.

That's why Paul says we display God's wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. And that's because we are the beginning of God's purposes for the whole cosmos. God is going to bring 'things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.' 'He chose to give us birth through the word of truth,' says James, 'that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.' (James 1:18) We are the first chink of light breaking through into the darkness of a disordered and fractured universe.

We are the first sign of a new dawn, of a new age. We are an outpost of heaven. We are heaven on earth.

Jesus said it this way: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35). “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23). He also speaks of his new community as the light to the world and city on a hill (Matthew 5:13-16). How will the world know? How will it believe in Jesus? Through the life of the Christian community – through our love and unity.

The application of this mystery is simple. Paul spells it out in verses 7-13. He says that he was made a minister and that his job is “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.” Let me spell that out in two parts:

1. We are called to a new commitment to community

In Ephesians 1:18. Paul prays “that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the

saints.” Whose inheritance is Paul taking about? Not ours (as in 1:14). But God’s! And what is God’s inheritance? Us! We are God’s inheritance.

The saints to whom Paul writes (1:1). The Christian community is God’s inheritance; we are God’s great purpose in history. This is God’s great purpose in history – to present the church as a bride for his Son. This is why Jesus died. He died because he loved his church. He died to sanctify his bride.

The church is God’s inheritance. The church is the bride for whom Christ died. Not some idealized church. The church that Christ died for was a disfigured, dirty and ugly bride. The people in this room are God’s inheritance. God is committed to the people in this room. He is so committed to them that he gave his only Son.

And so our commitment to the bride should reflect God’s commitment. In the next chapter Paul will admonish his readers: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2-3).¹

¹ Much of the below is borrowed from and inspired by Tim Chester’s lectures found on his blog (<http://timchester.wordpress.com/2006/12/08/the-puzzle-of-ephesians-3/>)

2. We are called to a commitment to mission through community

Christian community is a vital part of Christian mission. Mission takes place as people see our love for one another. We all know that the gospel is communicated both through the words that we say and the lives we live. What Jesus says is that it is the life we live together that counts. The life of the Christian community is part of the way by which the gospel is communicated. Missionary to India Lesslie Newbigin describes the local congregation as ‘the hermeneutic of the gospel’ – the way in which people understand the gospel.

We need to be communities of love. And we need to be seen to be communities of love. People need to encounter the church as a network of relationships rather than a meeting you attend or a place you enter. Mission must involve not only contact between unbelievers and individual Christians, but between unbelievers and the Christian community. We want to build relationships with unbelievers. But we also need to introduce people to the network of relationships that make up that believing community so that they see Christian community in action.

Let me call us to map out our lives. Literally, map out your life. I promise it will be a fun assignment. Most everyone loves a good map. The

first thing I do when I pick up a new Bible is flip to the back where it had those handful of maps. I've seen dozens of maps of the journeys of Paul and of the different eras of Israel, but I always want to see a new one.

Have you been on Google maps? It's unbelievable what they can do now. You can not only get satellite images of any destination on the world, but, in major cities, you can get shots from the street. It's amazing. Maps are wonderful because they have an ability to capture a collection of small truths in one picture.

So, here is what I want you to do. When you get home take out a map or print out a map of the area in which you live. Take out seven different colored markers or crayons and for each day of the week mark out your path on the map. Include when you would usually go to the grocery store, when you would usually go out for dinner, your trip to work, to the gym, etc, etc.

Now take a look at that map and ask yourself two questions:

1) Am I a missionary in each one of these places? Am I bringing the church, the witness of Christ to each one of these places? If not, you need to think critically through how you can change your patterns in those places so that you are being missional. Think about your pace, about who you're willing to and not willing to talk to.

2) Is this the pattern of life God is calling me to live? When we flip to the back of the Bible and look at Paul's missionary journeys or we hear reports of the missionaries we send out we think about God's calling them to a particular place. But there is no less specific call in our lives. We have a general call: to Princeton (or Lawrenceville, or Pennington, or wherever it is that you live), but God has a more specific plan for your life as well and for the patterns of your life. So, look at those patterns in your life. Are they missional patterns? Are you intentionally being part of the community to which God has called you?

I don't know about you, but evangelism is really difficult for me. It's pretty unlikely that I'm going to end up leading a stranger to Christ in the grocery store. I like my personal space. I like the lines of my life, the lines on my map to be uninterrupted. "Point A to Point B. Done." "Point B to Point C. Done." So, for those of us like me, it is really important that you think intentionally through how to make sure your life is touching the lives of those around you. Those in the church, yes, but also those outside the church.

In an effort to do this very thing I know of at least one individual who has begun volunteering at the Arts Council. Or another person in our church

works a few hours a week, not because she needs to, but because she wants to be interacting with unbelievers – getting into their world, their lives.

Change your patterns. America has been built on the nuclear family. That is a very comfortable place to live, but it can also be a very static, sterile, and ingrown place to live. Is your house your castle hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world or are your patterns of life pushing outward and drawing those who don't know Christ inward?

A few weeks ago Matt encouraged us to connect with those in the congregation of a different ethnicity over dinner. Let me encourage you that the church is a great place for that to start, but don't let it end there. Be aware of the contours and patterns of your life. How does your life flow? Where are you going? Where are all the lines bunched up? Where do they need to go?

The call on us is a call to reprogram ourselves. Touch the lives of those around you with the gospel: spoken and lived out.

There's a beautiful little phrase tucked near the end of this passage. In verse 10, Paul explains that God has done this so that his "manifold wisdom" might be revealed. "Manifold" is only used here in the Bible. In other a couple of other references outside the Bible it refers to a multicolored

cloth or flowers. It literally means “many-colored wisdom.” God’s church is a visible display of God’s nature to the world.

The mystery of Jew and Greek together is indeed a profound one. It is profound in the way it makes us consider God and his nature; it is profound in the way it makes us consider God’s purpose for the church.

Mystery no more: Church: you are the glorious, multi-faceted treasure of Christ. Show yourself: reveal Christ’s beauty and open his secret to a waiting world.

Doxology:

²⁵([AL](#)) Now to Him who is able to establish you ([AM](#)) according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of ([AN](#)) the mystery which has been kept secret for ([AO](#)) long ages past,

²⁶but now is manifested, and by ([AP](#)) the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to ([AQ](#)) obedience of faith;

²⁷to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, [\(AR\)](#)be the glory forever.

Amen.

Mystery no more. We humans like mystery in our life and especially in our religion. We were just down in Mexico for a family reunion and spent a day at the Mayan ruins at Tulum. The tour guide explained how the religious ceremonies were scheduled by the priests: through their knowledge of astronomy, the Mayan priests meticulously scheduled their ceremonies for particular days and times in order to line up the angle of the sun just so, so that the rays would enter the building at the perfect angle, refract through certain passage ways and create the illusion of a cosmic response to their sacrifices. And for even more dramatic effect they scheduled the most holy days on the days of solar or lunar eclipses. You can imagine the spiritual affect this had on people some thousand years ago in Central America.

When we returned we watched the movie *National Treasure 2: The Book of Secrets*. In the hands of the Disney writers, every artifact and historic event is not as it seems. The French version of the Statue of Liberty has a riddle engraved on it. The White House desk is really just a big puzzle. The Library of Congress stores a secret

Presidential book: everything is really just a puzzle or a riddle that covers something else much more mysterious. A thousand years later we haven't lost our taste for mysteries and secrets.

“God’s grace that was given to me” – that exact phrase occurs in both verse 2 and 7 and frames the argument. The first grace given to Paul is a fact – a revelation from God – the revelation of a divine mystery. The second grace given to Paul is Paul’s commission in light of that mystery.

The church is the expression of the gospel and the failure of the church to be that expression is an indictment on her. An expression of God’s universal love, of God’s. Of course every individual church cannot be that. But those who can, should be. It should not primarily be a cultural expression. It should not primarily be divided by our likes and tastes. The church is called to a higher plane. We are the expression of the character of God.

This is done for the principalities and powers. We are the dramatic presentation and they are the audience. Another interpretation: the political structures.

“The mystery was not an abstraction. It was taking concrete shape before people’s eyes. And in this new phenomenon, this new multi-racial humanity, the wisdom of God was being displayed. Indeed, the coming into existence of the church, as a community, of saved and reconciled people, is at one and the same time a public demonstration of God’s power, grace and kindness, and now thirdly of his manifold wisdom.” – Stott

“The major lesson taught by this first half of Ephesians 3 is the biblical centrality of the church. Some people construct a Christianity which consists entirely of a personal relationship to Jesus Christ and has virtually nothing to do with the church.

But we need to beware lest we despise the church of God, and are blind to his work in history. We may safely say that God has not abandoned his church, however displeased with it he may be. He is still building and refining it. And if God has not abandoned it, how can we? It has a central place in his plan.”

This passage teaches three basic things:

- 1) the church is central to history
 - “What is the eternal purpose which is now being worked out in history, this divine plan which thus belongs to both history and eternity? It concerns the church, the creating of a new and reconciled humanity in union with Jesus Christ. This is the mystery, hidden for ages but now revealed.”
 - Is this our view of history?
 - “Secular history concentrates its attention on kings, queens, and presidents, on politicians and generals, in fact on VIPs. The bible concentrates rather on a group it calls ‘the saints’, who are however at the same time God’s people – and for that reason are both ‘unknown (to the world) and yet well-known (to God).”

- “Secular history concentrates on the changing map of the world, as one nation defeats another and annexes its territory, and on the rise and fall of empires. The Bible concentrates rather on a multi-national community called ‘the church’, which has no territorial frontiers, which claims nothing less than the whole world for Christ, and whose empire will never come to an end.”
 - “The living God is the God of all the nations of the world, yet within the universal human community there exists a ‘covenant community’ his own new society, the beginning of his new creation. It is to this people only that he has pledged himself with the everlasting promise: ‘I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’”
- 2) The church is central to the gospel
 - “The gospel is good news of a new society as well as of a new life.”
 - 3) The church is central to Christian living
 - 4) The church needs to be redefined – it is a community that should not be primarily defined by being called out of the world, but by being called into the world. The church is God’s body because it moves in the same direction God moves: toward the world.