

Sunday Sermon November 1
The Uncovering: A Profound Mystery
Ephesians 3:1-13

What's your favorite mystery: Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie? Maybe you have enjoyed movies like: *The Inception*, *The Green Mile*, *The Unusual Suspects*, *Psycho* or *The Maltese Falcon*. Further, we live in a world with mysteries all around us. We don't seem to understand what would seem to be the simplest things. For example, a 2012 article from MIT's *Technology Review* explored a substance that still has scientists baffled: ice. (No, I'm not referring to immigration.) The article states, "Ice is one of the best studied materials on Earth, but ice is still a complex substance that mystifies researchers—hence the title of the article: "The Mysterious Challenge of Understanding Ice." A group of scientists at the "frontiers of ice research" explain that we still have a remarkable variety of open questions about ice. Chemists still don't understand how ice structures form in the first place. Atmospheric physicists would dearly like to know how ice grows in the atmosphere. Questions remain about "snow physics" and "sea ice." Beyond earth, we still don't know much about the ice in ice comets. Scientists also don't know much about the ice that forms on the icy moons of the outer solar system. We truly live in a world of mystery. Well as we come to our text, Paul expounds on his favorite mystery. He gives to us four aspects of this mystery.

I. The Mystery's Prisoner - 3:1-4

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ...

Whatever this mystery is, Paul is a prisoner because of it. By this time he has been a prisoner in Caesarea for two years and in Rome for three years. *But what is amazing is his perspective.* Although things around him, humanly speaking, looked bad – awfully bad, he was consumed by two realities.

1. The whole of our life is under God's sovereign control.

Although he been arrested on false charges by the Jews and although he had been imprisoned by Rome, he did not consider himself a prisoner of Rome. He was the prisoner of Christ! Whatever he did and wherever he went he was under the authority and protection of the Lord. Externally he was a captive because of his preaching of the gospel and internally he was a captive to doing the will of Christ. Had he thought that his life was ultimately in the hands of his persecutors, his jailers, his guards, he would long since have given up in despair. But whatever afflictions he endured he knew that his future was totally in the hands of the Lord. Indeed his imprisonment had resulted in the greater progress of the gospel - even the salvation of those among the Praetorian Guard.

2. The whole of our life is the fulfilling of our stewardship of the grace of Christ.

We have all been given two privileges. We have a certain revelation and we have a certain commission. These are two gifts of divine grace. There is a mystery revealed to both Paul and us and there is a ministry entrusted to both Paul and us. We are God's stewards which means that we are responsible for our calling, spiritual gifts, opportunities, skills, knowledge, and every other blessing that has come from the Lord. We have been entrusted as stewards to manage our lives and everything we possess with attitudes and actions that are "fit for a King."

II. The Mystery's Plan - 3:5-6

⁵ *which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*

⁶ *This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

1. Now exactly what is this mystery?

Three times in the short paragraph Paul uses the word "mystery." We need to realize that the English and Greek words do not have the same meaning. In English, a mystery is something obscure, secret, puzzling. There is a sense in which it is incomprehensible. The Greek word is quite different. As John Stott writes, in the Greek, "a mystery is a truth hitherto hidden from human knowledge or understanding, but now

disclosed by the revelation of God.” In this case, this mystery was not known by the Old Testament prophets, but has been revealed to the apostles, the New Testament church. The mystery is that Gentile believers and Jewish believers are in equal partnership. Both Gentiles and Jews are coheirs of the future glory, co-members of the same spiritual family, and co-sharers of the new covenant blessings. They are in complete union not only with Christ, but with each other. They share equally each and every bit of the gospel news!

2. What’s the “big deal” here?

First, you cannot understand for even a moment how earthshattering this was in Paul’s day. These people despised each other! It would be no different than to say to an elitist today that he or she was no better than the drunk rolling in the gutter or the prostitute by the road. It would be like saying that the rednecks and the refined must worship together. It would be like saying that all staunch believing liberals and all staunch believing conservatives both share the same destiny and the same promises in Christ. Some of you are saying right now that you didn’t know that a liberal could be a believer or that you didn’t know that a conservative could be a believer. Further, Paul is saying that the earthly distinction of Jew and Gentile disappears with the inauguration of the church.

III. The Mystery’s Proclamation - 3:7-9

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things...

1. We proclaim it by God’s grace.

Paul equates the gospel with this mystery. There is a real sense in which the gospel is the good news that people from every tribe, every nation, and every ethnicity have the privilege to become one in the family of Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection. When Paul thinks of this high and holy privilege he is reminded of how little he is. His name

means little and he was thought to be little in stature. He had been a persecutor of Christians. He is little in name, little in stature, and little in spirituality – the least of all the saints. If Paul considered himself to be extremely unworthy of this grace and the privilege to proclaim this gospel message, so should we! We cannot share the gospel with a condescending attitude or an air of arrogance. None of us deserve to be the recipients of the gospel or its messengers. When you believe this you will be amazed at how effective you will become in sharing the good news.

2. We proclaim it with God’s power.

May I remind you that it is not our job to convict or convince sinners. We go forward with supernatural enablement!

3. We proclaim the greatest story ever told.

The unsearchable unconditional love, or unfathomable riches of Christ include all his truths and all his blessings. We get to tell the thrilling story of how God gives to each and every sinner forgiveness, wisdom, mercy, hope, and supply of their every need. We have the blessing of extending to them the wonderful thought that every day is a blessed day. No matter what kind of agony or suffering they go through in their lives, they can say “I am blessed.” Why? Because almost their entire future lies ahead of them in an eternity where they will experience extravagant blessings beyond anything ever thought imaginable.

IV. The Mystery’s Purpose – 3:10-13

⁷ ¹⁰ *so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*

¹¹ *This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,* ¹² *in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.* ¹³ *So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.*

1. It reveals “the manifold wisdom of God.”

The word here for manifold means “variegated” or made up of many different kinds. He is speaking of the church as a multiracial, multicultural community which has been woven together like a beautiful tapestry. Its members come from a wide range of colorful backgrounds.

No other human community resembles it. Its diversity and harmony are unique. The church is an audiovisual display of God's saving or redeeming work. In this it testifies to God's grace and wisdom. No man or woman would ever have come up with a plan of salvation like this one. Reconciliation is the dominant feature of church life.

2. It is a marvelous display for the Angel's benefit.

The Angels are the audience. They are the cosmic intelligences who are the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. They are the spectators of the drama of salvation. It becomes clear that God never clearly revealed his master plan for the church to the angels. Instead, he made it known to them through the church as it began and as it grows. God revealed the glory of his wisdom to humans in the first creation. He reveals his glory to the angels for the new creation, the church.

3. It gives us bold and confident access to God.

Believers, regardless of race or background, can address God boldly approaching confidently because of Christ's work. We as forgiven sinners do not come to God hesitantly, wondering about our likely reception. We know that the phone is never busy when we dial or text God.

Conclusion

We are one in Christ - one Lord, one faith. One baptism. Indeed this oneness is so otherworldly that it is a mystery in so many ways. One wonderful example of this mystery in action is told by Marks, a producer for television's *60 Minutes*. He went on a two-year quest to investigate evangelicals, the group he had grown up among and later rejected. He wrote a book about the quest called *Reasons to Believe: One Man's Journey Among the Evangelicals and the Faith He Left Behind*. You see, the church's response to Hurricane Katrina turned the corner for him and became a key reason to believe. One Baptist church in Baton Rouge fed 16,000 people a day for weeks; another housed 700 homeless evacuees. Years after the hurricane, and long after federal assistance had dried up, a network of churches in surrounding states was still sending regular teams to help rebuild houses. Most impressively to Marks, all these church efforts crossed racial lines and barriers in the Deep South. As one worker told him, "We had whites, blacks, Hispanics, Vietnamese, good

old Cajun. We just tried to say, hey, let's help people. This is our state. We'll let everybody else sort out that other stuff. We've got to cook some rice." Marks concludes: I would argue that this was a watershed moment in the history of American Christianity ... nothing spoke more eloquently to believers, and to nonbelievers who were paying attention, than the success of a population of believing volunteers measured against the massive and near-total collapse of secular government efforts. The storm laid bare an unmistakable truth. More and more Christians have decided that the only way to reconquer America is through service. The faith no longer travels by the word. It moves by the deed. (That is why our small starting church has had the passion and privilege to reach out to the poor in our local elementary school. It is our joy to package 100 backpacks of food for the weekend. Over the course of the month every child gets a backpack (400 children) at least once a month. Our prayer is that we will soon be able to pack enough meals for every child each weekend.)

Now this mystery also means that when someone criticizes your church or any other evangelical church it is the same as criticizing your wife or dearest friend. Imagine this scenario: A man invites a friend into his home for dinner. They enjoy a delicious meal that the man's wife has graciously offered to make. The man and his friend casually catch up on life, but then halfway through the meal, the invited guest starts to do something unbelievable. He starts listing things that his friend's wife could have done better. "The chicken was way too tough," he says. "You should have marinated it longer. And the broccoli is overcooked, mushy and bland. My 12-year-old daughter could cook a better meal. And she should really do something else with her hair." Then he starts to criticize her character, even ridicule her. I'm guessing his visit would be cut short. And the guest would probably get sent away with a few choice words. Even if he was right about certain things, the typical husband simply wouldn't tolerate someone openly and caustically criticizing his wife. He loves her, and for a husband that leads to accepting and honoring his wife despite her quirks and shortcomings. Unfortunately we tolerate this mean-spirited criticism all the time when it's directed at our church or another church. If we're not careful, it's easy for us to look

at this church and her leaders, and say, "The church should have done ____." Or, "I wish they hadn't ____." You fill in the blanks.

*** Let's take time this week to reflect on the mystery that is the church!