

1/8/23 Communion and Remembrance Sunday

Sermon: Paul's Mystery

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-12, CTW Psalm 72:1-7

Hymns: 271, 181, 153

Theme: What do you need to approach God with? Is there anything in your life you have been holding back from Him? Maybe there is an area of your life you haven't given over to Him to have control in. Approach Him this morning. Answer His call. His door is open, you don't need to make an appointment, just start the conversation and be real with Him. Don't treat God's grace as a mystery. Pour your heart out to Him. He promises to hear you.

I. Introduction: Paul Sidetracked?

Did you ever get in trouble in school for writing an incomplete sentence? The teacher scrawls a big red pen word across the page – "incomplete!" and reduces your grade accordingly. Our Scripture passage today, **Eph. 3:1-13**, begins with just such a sentence.

Paul begins a sentence, saying "for this reason, I Paul, ..." and then gets sidetracked – gets diverted – and never finishes the sentence.

What sidetracks Paul is the need to explain his role and his responsibility, he talks about being a prisoner of Christ for the sake of the gentiles and realizes that it would be helpful for his readers to know more about him and what it is that Jesus has told him that is so incredible he is willing to suffer imprisonment and persecution for it.

Today we will try to figure out where Paul is coming from...and going to, with all of this.

II. And The Mystery is... (vs. 1-6)

Back in chap. 1:9, Paul said that God “made known to us the mystery of his will,” but he never told us what that mystery was. He left that until now.

He tells us several things about the mystery before actually stating what it is:

1. It is described as “the administration of God’s grace” (vs. 2), a phrase that makes sense once we see what the mystery is in vs. 6.

2. It was given to Paul by “revelation,” (vs. 3), meaning it came directly from God to Paul. It is possible that this happened when Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road (**see Acts 9**), I think it maybe came a little later, but regardless, it is clear that Paul intends us to know that revealing the content of the mystery is directly from God.

3. It was previously hidden but has now been revealed (vs. 5). It is like a good mystery novel or movie – the clues have been there all along, but it is not until we get to the end that we see how the various pieces all fit together.

So what is this mystery, exactly? **The mystery is the incredible unity of the church – that we are all one in Christ.** The entire passage thus far comes to this point – that through the Gospel of Jesus Christ **we are all one.**

Paul uses three terms to describe this unity: A) heirs together; B) members together of one body; and C) we share together in the promise.

A. We are Heirs together:

You don’t earn an inheritance – it is a gift. Paul is saying here that together we receive the inheritance of God. And it is not the idea of God divvying up His riches and distributing a bit here, a bit there – **the idea is that together we receive the same thing.**

Together we receive the gift of salvation. It is like leaving your house to your children – it is not like one gets the upstairs and the other gets the basement. The inheritance is to them together, and then they need to work together to receive the benefits of the inheritance.

B. We Are Members together:

This is interesting – Paul invents a word here: “JOINT HEIRS”. **(Sync-lir-ono-me)** The word he uses is found nowhere else in the Bible or in any other writings of the time; in order to make his point Paul invents this word that pictures us all joined together into one body.

This is the theme he has been developing all along – that we all as Christians belong to the same body – the church of Christ, with Jesus as the head – and that it is only us all together that make up this body.

C. We are Sharers together:

This is the third great unifier – that together we share in the promise. What promise? I believe this is a reference to the Holy Spirit, based on Chapter 1, verse 13: “And you were also included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the Gospel of your salvation. Having believed you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

This then means that the third thing which brings us all together is the promise of the Holy Spirit – and the fact that all who believe in Jesus receive this gift.

Note the key word in each of these three points – **“together.”** We are not heirs alone. We are not exclusive members. We do not receive the Holy Spirit in isolation from one another.

Rather, the point Paul is going to great lengths to make (even inventing a word to maintain this emphasis), is that the great mystery of God is that together, all Christians make up the church of God...the body.

This says to me that we had better be united as a local body of believers, and that we had better be open to what God is doing in other areas of His kingdom.

And if there are disagreements or dissension, they had better be around areas that are significant and not trivial – for example we had better not unite with people who deny that Jesus is the Son of God, and we better not divide with people who prefer a different music style than we do or would rather worship and witness at a different time. John Wesley said, “In Essentials, Unity. In non-essentials, Diversity. In all things, Charity.”

III. The Mystery is to be Shared: (vs. 7-11)

The second section in the passage talks about sharing this mystery.

A. Shared With the Gentiles

The first people with whom the mystery is shared are the **Gentiles** (vs. 8). In keeping with the purpose of the passage which is to share more of himself with his hearers, Paul mentions some of his personal experience in verse 7 and then explains that his job is to share this great mystery with the gentiles.

I want to point out just briefly how Paul describes this in vs. 8, because it is a beautiful descriptor: **he says he is called to preach “the unsearchable riches of Christ”**.

One commentator says that this “suggests the picture of a reservoir so deep that soundings cannot reach the bottom of it. No limit can, therefore, be put to its resources.”

Paul wants us to understand that he resources, the forgiveness, the power of God are like a reservoir so deep we can never find the bottom of it – we can never draw too much of it – we can never exhaust it.

Draw strength from that truth today – whatever you are facing, God’s resources are abundant.

B. Shared With all people

The sharing of the mystery is not limited to the gentiles. Paul goes on to say in the next verse that he wants to make this plain "to everyone". **He wants all people to understand that there is hope and unity for us together in Christ.**

C. Shared With All Rulers and Authorities

Verse 10 catches us a bit by surprise. Paul says that the third group with whom the mystery of God is shared is the spiritual realm, and that the existence of the church demonstrates this mystery.

I believe what this verse is teaching is that the unity of the church – a multi-faceted grouping of people together in Christ – demonstrates to **all** the spiritual realm the incredible wisdom and plan of God. **The Communion service is all about united spirituality!**

This reminds us that our faith and our witness is not merely a human thing, it is a spiritual thing.

Other evil spiritual forces would try to rob us of the energy and urgency. To sidetrack us with non-essential issues.

IV. The Climax of the Passage(vs. 12):

Verse 12 brings us to the climax of the passage. It is a simple sentence, but full of profound truth.

Have you ever had the experience of needing to see someone or talk to someone, feeling fairly desperate about it, feeling a great deal of urgency, like **"I need to talk with them NOW!"**... only to find that they are unavailable?

You hear answers like "I can book you an appointment in one month;" "I'm sorry, he is out of the office but I can try to get him to return your call later;" or my personal favorite, the busy signal followed five minutes later by no answer!

It is not that way with God. His phone is never busy. You'll never get a voicemail message that says "I am in the office but temporarily away from my desk." You'll never get a secretary who tells you that He can squeeze in a brief appointment a week from Thursday...

On the contrary, God is waiting for you. His door is open. His phone line is clear. His personal email address is available to you to use. God is accessible, open, free, and inviting you and I to talk with Him. He NEVER leaves our side because of the Holy Spirit!

A. Look at what verse 12 says: "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence!" – the Him here is Christ, that is clear from the last part of vs. 11. It is because of Jesus that we have this open access to God the Father.

It is because we have been made into one unified new person in Christ that we can come before God at any time. **Look at Jesus in John chapter 17..."my prayer, Father is that they all may be ONE, just as you and I are one."**

B. Note the role of faith – of placing our hope and trust in Jesus as our Lord. Part of this means we have faith that God will hear our cry; and part of it means that we will have the faith to accept God's response as what is best for us. Through Jesus "we may approach God, ANYTIME!

A man during the Civil War was sitting on a park bench in Washington, D.C., crying. His son, under great distress, had deserted his post in battle and was to be shot by a firing squad soon. The father had come to the capitol to see President Abraham Lincoln but couldn't get past the front gates. People passed by, but nobody stopped to listen.

Finally, a little boy stopped and asked the man why he was crying. In his emotional distress, he told his story. He ended by

saying that if he could talk to the president, he knew his son would be pardoned.

The young boy asked the man to follow him. When they came to the front gate of the White House, the little boy said to the soldiers, "It's all right, he's with me." The man followed in amazement.

They came to the room where President Lincoln was conferring with his generals and cabinet members, guarded by yet another detachment of soldiers. The young boy pushed inside and jumped up on the president's lap. Conversation stopped as the boy said, "Daddy, there's a man I want you to meet. He needs your help."

The man was brought in to talk with the president. The man's son received the presidential pardon because the son of the president took an interest in his plight.

V. Conclusion: Through Jesus we have access to God, what an incredible truth! We, who are in our old nature corrupt and rebellious and sinful and objects of God's wrath, are suddenly, miraculously, invited into God's presence by virtue of His Son!

A. What do you need to approach God with? Is there anything in your life you have been holding back from Him? Maybe you've never approached Him at all, and maybe today you have heard God's invitation and you want to respond.

As you approach this table he has set for us today, know that you are approaching HIM. His door is open, you don't need to make an appointment, just start the conversation and be truthful with Him.

Pour your heart out to Him. He promises to hear you. Come to HIS table and start your year by being refreshed!

Amen! Let Us Pray...