

MYSTERY

Last week someone brought a puzzle to church. It was a word game in which the point was to find twenty five books of the Bible hidden in a narrative text. I found it rather amusing to see young and old happily toiling over the paper in an effort to discover all twenty five books.

Why did they do that? What was the attraction?

I believe part of the attraction was the fact that people love a mystery, and they love finding the answer to a mystery. They enjoyed that puzzle for the same reason that many of us love Agatha Christie and writers of that ilk. There is something in human beings that is fascinated with that which is hidden.

Mystery is an essential part of life. Terms that we use on a regular basis such as love and joy and life are in one sense, a statement of mystery. We know that these things are essential for our existence, but we don't know fully what those words really mean. We are forever discovering their meaning. We are, in small ways, forever having the mystery of life revealed to us.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, a day in the church year traditionally associated with the coming of the wise men to the Christ child. The wise men did not follow the star because they knew everything. The wise men came because they were intrigued by the mystery. The wise men wanted to know more. The wise men wanted to see the secret of the star for themselves. They wanted the divine mystery to be revealed.

I think that's where wisdom and salvation begins for all of us. It is a desire to know. It is a desire to have our own personal epiphany. It is a desire to understand for ourselves the meaning of the Mystery beyond all mysteries, the Hope beyond all hopes.

A MYSTERY REVEALED

And that's what today's lesson from Ephesians is all about. It's about a mystery revealed. It is about an epiphany, the revelation of God's presence in Jesus Christ and, what that revelation means to all people.

Let's cut right to the chase. What is the mystery revealed by God's son, Jesus? How is this revelation different from all other revelations? The answer is found in verse six of our lesson for today. It reads,

" the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Ephesians 3:6

This is the big secret of the gospel. The barrier between Jews and Gentiles has been torn down. (Ephesians 2:14) God's salvation is much more expansive than anyone had ever imagined. God's salvation is not just for a certain people or a certain denomination or a certain nation. God's salvation is for the world.

Everyone even the unorthodox "Gentiles" can be a part of God's kingdom. Those whom the religious world had declared unclean had been offered acceptance by God.

This is the big secret. And this is what got Paul and the rest of the Christians of the first century into such hot water. Why? This salvation was too broad.

In the ancient world (much like in the modern world) religion was a way of distinguishing between "us and them." Jews and Gentiles didn't mingle because well, it was "against their religion." The first century world said much the same kind of thing that some of us say even today, "We know who our enemies are because they have different ideas about God."

But, the apostle Paul and early Christian disciples received a startling revelation. The mystery of God was not to be found in building a fence around themselves and separating themselves from the people of the world. The mystery of God was to be found in accepting and loving the people of the world in the name of Jesus Christ. God's proclamation of grace in Jesus Christ was a word of salvation for all people.

The task of the gospel was not to define who was in and who was out but to turn enemies into friends. The mystery revealed in Jesus Christ brought with it a mission to bring the gospel into the whole world.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE MYSTERY

And that, of course, was the problem. The world didn't want to be bothered with such an intrusive religion. The early Christians said Jesus is Lord. When they said that, they didn't just mean that Jesus was Lord of their life or of their community. They meant that Jesus was Lord of heaven and earth.

Jesus was in charge not only of religion but also of politics and culture and everything. There was a universal scope to God's salvation in Jesus Christ. It was for all people, and it was for all of society as well.

There's a saying in our country, "religion and politics don't mix." And we have held to that saying pretty well making religion a private, personal matter.

But, that was not the gospel preached by those first disciples of Jesus Christ. The church would have never been persecuted by the Roman Empire if they had been content to keep their religion a private, personal matter. Indeed, the Romans thought that religions were a good thing. It kept the people happy. As Marx would later put it, religion of this sort was an opiate for the people.

I think that too much of what passes for faith in our country is not the bold, inclusive message of the gospel. It is instead a private and personal form of religion that does not challenge the ways of the world.

David Brooks, a columnist for the New York Times, noted in an editorial this past Wednesday that many churches in our country have become "therapeutic" in their language. Less emphasis is placed on "divisive" doctrine and more emphasis is placed on feelings. Quoting a book by Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion*, Brooks contends that evangelical churches "are part of the mainstream of American culture, not dissenters from it."

I contend that this private, therapeutic faith is not, at least at its heart, the gospel. The gospel has a way of challenging us all and including us all. Whether we think the gospel is good news or bad news, depends upon where we stand in society.

The early Christians proclaimed the good news that "Jesus is Lord," but it wasn't such good news to Caesar or Herod and the other movers and shakers of the ancient world. It wasn't good news to the religious elite who wanted their particular viewpoints to prevail.

That's why the apostle Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians from prison. It wasn't because he did something wrong. It was because he preached a gospel that the world wasn't ready to hear. He was, as he put it, "a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles ... "

GOD'S CHOSEN

Paul's inclusion of Gentiles in the early church was something that got him into trouble not only with Jewish religious leaders and political leaders. It also got Paul into trouble with his fellow

believers. One of the first church meetings recorded in the book of Acts was called to deal with that controversy.

Paul was allowing Gentiles into the church without first having them become Jews. The Jewish leaders of the church were not so sure that was a good idea. They still hadn't quite understood the notion of salvation by grace alone. They wanted to put conditions on church membership. They were afraid of a salvation that was at least in their eyes too broad.

There was a reason for this. The Jews understood themselves to be special. They understood themselves to be God's chosen people. Of all the peoples of the world, God had chosen them to receive the Law and the story of salvation. Here again we run into that doctrine of Election that is found throughout the Bible.

The question is this, "Is it true?" Did God elect Israel? Did God really choose the people of Israel out of all the peoples of the earth? I believe this was true, and I believe this is true. But, the harder question is this, "What does that calling mean? Why were the Jews out of all the people of the world chosen to receive the teachings of the prophets and the law?"

There were several thoughts on this matter. Some thought that God's choice of Israel to be his people meant Israel had a privileged position. God would be on his people's side in their battles with the nations of the world. You can see that idea portrayed in the Old Testament when the Israelites carry the Ark of the Covenant before them into battle. They believed that God would fight for them.

This was a very nationalistic viewpoint. Everyone else was an outsider, a "Gentile" fit for destruction.

But, through repeated defeats on the battlefield and a time of exile, the religious leaders of Israel began to interpret election in a different way.

Perhaps their job as God's chosen was to be different from others. The reason they lost in battle was because they didn't fulfill their end of the "bargain" that God had made with them. They needed to be more circumspect about religious rituals and following the letter of the law. Then, they would please God, and God's blessing would come to them.

This was the thinking behind those who challenged Paul's acceptance of Gentiles into the Christian faith. In order to become a part of God's chosen people, Gentiles had to be circumcised and instructed in the Law.

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

But, Paul contended that his brothers and sisters in the faith had also misunderstood the nature of their relationship with God as revealed in Jesus.

No one really could fulfill the law. Everyone, Israel and the pagan world fell short of God's glory. (Romans 3:23) The Law was sort of a temporary measure to keep things from getting as bad as they could get. In that sense, the Law was a gift. But, the Law was never intended to be the final salvation for Israel or for the people of the world.

Instead, according to Paul, the Law prepared the way for the gospel. Those who were most serious about the Law realized from their own failures that the Law would never bring about the peace they desired. The Law was like a teacher, teaching God's people their weakness and the fact that they needed something more than their own efforts to become a part of God's kingdom.

They needed more than good advice. They needed the grace of God in Jesus Christ. They needed the good news of God's unconditional forgiveness.

Leslie Newbigin is the author of a very important book on mission entitled, *The Open Secret*. In that book he wrote that Paul's argument could be summarized by saying that, ".... the covenant is not to be turned into a contract. [The covenant] is not a bargain which will entitle a [person] to claim rights from God on the ground that he[or she] has fulfilled its conditions. The covenant is an act of the free grace of God; it is the unconditional promise of blessing to be received by faith."

Newbigin goes on to say that God's strategy for the salvation of the world was and is to destroy every claim that we may have to goodness. In this manner, the way is cleared for the gospel of grace alone.

One of my favorite passages which emphasizes this fact comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. These Gentile believers at Corinth thought that they were the greatest in the kingdom of God because they had a successful church filled with "spiritual" experiences. But, Paul reminded them that they should not celebrate success. Instead, they should look back at what they were before they were called to be Christians and use that as a way to understand their calling .

Paul wrote, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" 1 Corinthians 1:27-31

SPECIAL SERVICE

In other words, the election of God is not an election to special privilege but an election to special service. That's how Paul understood his calling. In our lesson for today we learn that Paul's call was a "commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ..."

Paul's commission was not something that he sought. It was not even something for which he was particularly qualified. Paul was a persecutor of the church. Paul even participated in the death of some early followers of Christ because he thought that they were perverting the true faith. For that reason Paul refers to himself in this passage as the "least of all the saints."

But, despite all this, Paul was called. Paul's commission was a calling thrust upon him by the presence of God on the road to Damascus. Paul was chosen. Paul had his eyes opened so that many others might see as well. (Ephesians 3:8-9)

This is the mysterious calling of God. This is the secret that is revealed through Jesus Christ for the first time. God is a God of grace who chooses to reveal that universal grace through particular events and particular people.

First, of course, that grace is most definitively revealed through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. But, then that grace is revealed through others as well. The apostles, Paul, and many other unlikely men and women have been called down through the years to proclaim God's grace in word and deed. Their proclamation was not based upon theory but upon personal experience. They could talk about grace because God had chosen them in grace.

You see, the grace of God in Jesus Christ is not a theoretical proposition. It is not a doctrine to be memorized or debated. It is more concrete and real than that. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is a practical reality experienced through people who are elected or called by God to make it so.

STEWARDS OF A UNIVERSAL MESSAGE

I believe that God is still calling men and women to be stewards of God's grace. God is calling individual people to tell others the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. God still operates in a personal way to tell a universal message.

This is why mission is at the heart of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. The whole point of our calling is to tell others the good news that God is loving and gracious. The whole point of our particular calling in Jesus Christ is to promote the universal message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

This is, perhaps, the most mysterious part of this great mystery that God has chosen us, as imperfect as we are to proclaim the message. We are certainly not better than anyone else. But, we have been chosen to preach a message. We have a practical role to play in a grander scheme.

William Barclay tells a story of the days when Christopher Wren was building St. Paul's Cathedral. On one occasion Sir Christopher Wren himself was making a tour of the work in progress. He came upon a man at work and asked him, "What are you doing?" The man replied, "I am cutting this stone to a certain size and shape."

He came upon a second man and asked him the same question, "What are you doing?" The man said, "I am earning money for my labor."

Wren came upon a third man and asked him also, "What are you doing?" The man replied, "I am helping Sir Christopher Wren to build St. Paul's Cathedral."

It was the third man's greater vision which transformed the work he did and the life he led.

The same thing is true for us. If someone were to come up to us and ask us what we are doing, how would we answer? We could truthfully answer that we are typing a letter or paying a bill. We could truthfully answer that we are working for a living with the activities that occupy our daily routine.

But, our lesson from Ephesians suggests that there is a more important purpose behind all that we are and do. We are a part of God's plan and purpose.

The apostle Paul suffered imprisonment because he preached the gospel. But, Paul did not just think about all that he lost through imprisonment. He thought about all that he gained. He was not just any prisoner. He was a prisoner for Christ. (Ephesians 3:1) His sufferings were not a reason for despair but part of a greater plan. (Ephesians 3:13)

One commentator suggested that if the apostle Paul had not been in prison, he would not have had time to write the many letters to various churches. And, in the Providence of God, these letters touched many more people than Paul could have touched just ministering to one church. Though he could not have seen it at the time, Paul's statement of faith about his imprisonment proved to be true. He was indeed a prisoner for Christ. His sufferings not only benefited the Gentiles of the church at Ephesus. His sufferings benefited the church down through the ages.

Though we might not be chosen for as large a purpose as Paul, I believe that we too have a part to play in building up the body of Christ. We too have a role in building that living building of which Christ is the chief cornerstone. At times it will be hard to see our role in the building of this great church. Sometimes it will seem more like suffering than glory.

But, through the eyes of faith, we are able to see more than the present circumstances. Through the hope of God's promise, we are able to see each day as a divine mystery being revealed. We understand what we could not understand by ourselves. We touch something that is bigger than

we could ever imagine. We become a part of God's universal love through the particular story of our life.

There was an old limerick which went something like this, "How odd of God to chose the Jews." But, that line could be applied to us as well. How odd of God to chose strange people like us as heralds of a glorious faith. As God was in Christ, so God is in our lives transforming who we are and what we do for the greater good of the body of Christ.

What a great mystery and what a wonderful promise.

Amen.