

Ephesians 3:10-21

The Mystery Revealed

I have something very important to tell you. You may have figured that out already. “The Mystery Revealed” surely sounds momentous, like I have a big announcement to make. Now, this title comes from verse 9, immediately before our passage, where the author refers to the mystery “hidden for ages,” and I believe that verses 10-21 give us an answer or solution to this mystery. Here, the writer mentions God’s wisdom and his eternal purpose in Christ; and our knowledge and comprehension, and being filled up with the fullness of God, the perfection of God. So, there is something here that will help us understand what God is about.

I have spent much of the past two days with other board members at Helping Hands Ministry going through board training. And two questions that the seminar leader asked us are very appropriate for understanding our work as a board, and I think, for understanding our sermon text today. He asked us to tell 1) what strengths and 2) what weaknesses we bring to the board. It was so much easier to recognize the strengths of other people, perhaps their training in law or social work or business; someone’s standing in the community. One board member brought home to me the meaning that group of people make up a board, and so then, that a group of people make up the church. She said that she always felt out of place on

the board because she was uneducated, had never felt comfortable talking about budgets and fund raising, never thought she had anything to offer as a board member. You should have heard the others respond to her, those who had known her for decades- it really was quite moving to hear them talk about her godly care for the families who came needing help, her devotion to the work of Helping Hands, her compassion and love for God's creatures. And I realized here was the meaning of verse 10, that says, "through the church the wisdom of God is made known." *Not one of us alone can understand the mystery of God, but all of us together- in relationships, in shared joy and shared sorrow, learning from each other, watching God's working in other lives.* We couldn't be a board of directors by ourselves, but it takes all of us; we can't be the church all by ourselves, but by our diversity, the strange combination of different personalities and backgrounds and talents, brought together by the grace of God, and connected by the love of Jesus, and led by the Holy Spirit, we come to understand that we are the church; *we see what God is in his relationship with each of us; and we reveal God to the world as it beholds our love for one another.*

The story of the church is that each of us is God's child, and all of us together make up God's people; and we learn from one another, serve one another

and are blessed by the presence of other people whom God has called to be our brothers and sisters. There is the mystery: it is *us*, and not just *me*.

When I think mystery, I can't help but think of the great detectives we might put on the case to uncover the secrets. I'm sure you have your favorite, mine is Phillip Marlowe, but there is also Hercule Poirot, or Lord Peter Wimsey or Miss Marple, or Charlie Chan. Now, what the detectives must do is sift through evidence and cast aside the false leads, the wrong assumptions- you know the term for those, don't you? They are red herrings. And red herrings are lies; and we are looking for the truth.

Sometimes I stand up here and I think I have discovered something big in the sermon text, and I want to pass that along to you. But this can be a dangerous idea, thinking that I may be the only one who understands the mystery. As though I have studied all the clues and now stand before all the suspects to announce the murderer. Dangerous, because the ego involved; this knowledge elevates me above you- now, understand, it is very subtle- it may sneak up on me and I may actually come to believe it; and that is when I become very dangerous- people smarter and more humble than I have been tricked into this kind of ego-trip. This attitude could cause me, or any minister, to think I am smarter than you, to think I

know more than the scripture. So, I must be careful never to come to a passage of scripture with a preset agenda, but must always approach scripture with prayer and humility, and always work diligently, so that I may speak the truth of holy scripture and not my own interpretation. But as I said, it is difficult, and I often feel more like Inspector Clouseau than Sherlock Holmes.

So, this is my confession to you. It is always a battle to discover the truth, or is it merely the minister's perception of truth? That is one of the red herrings we must get past. The minister does not necessarily have the answer to the meaning of God's purpose in the world and in our lives. He or she may be able to point you in the right direction, but you can hear evangelists on TV, preachers in the pulpit, pastors in the counseling office, and you can read it in their books, who say they have the answer, and I only want to say to you- in a gentle way, I hope- that they may be red herrings. Their teachings may lead in the wrong direction, may be only partial truth, may focus on secondary issues. So let's just get rid of those red herrings, like those that have to do with racial bias- I shouldn't even have to bring this up! but I receive an e-mail most every week, sometimes more than one, from devout, God-fearing people, that has at its core unconfessed racism. Let's get rid of political agendas; I receive one or two e-mails a week from people who base

their religion upon conservative politics. Now, it doesn't matter if you are conservative or liberal; we do not have to agree politically to love people in the name of Jesus Christ. Let's get rid of the past as a red herring, the idea that life was better back then, and we need to get back to those days, or we are all lost. Really, it may not have been better in olden times, and besides today is all we have. Let's get rid of the pious ideal of Jesus and the Bible and me and that's all we need, that we make a perfect unit together, like the bumper sticker from years ago, "God said it, and I believe it, and that settles it!" How full of oneself can anybody get! We've got to leave some room in God's kingdom for other people! Let's get rid of the twisted ideas about success. Success in the church is not to be measured with a business yardstick. Let's get rid of the lie that the truth is easy. That is a big one. So many churches seem to be content with half-truths like, God wants you to be happy, or popular, or successful; that is very pleasant sounding, but we need the whole truth, the mystery of who God is, and why he has chosen us, and what he wants from us.

As we read Ephesians, we keep coming across phrases like "the riches of God's grace," "the riches of his glory," "the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge," "God's eternal purpose." And they lead us to this understanding of

the truth- the mystery revealed: that above all this secret knowledge of God is love, the love of Christ. “God’s eternal purpose” and “the immeasurable riches of God’s grace” are simply his plan to show us and to give to us, without limit, his perfect love.

This love is the tearing down of walls that separate people, 2:14; it is the recognition of and the glad welcome of others, strangers and aliens, who have now become fellow citizens in the household of faith, 2:19; 3:3-6 describes the revealing of the mystery- that Gentiles are fellow heirs with the Jews, members of the same body, who partake of the same promise in Christ Jesus. Our passage proclaims that every family takes its name from God the Father, and so, we are all related. We have become one people, one family, by the love of God.

And so, this meal we take together is not so much like the ancient mystery religions, as though we would join a secret society, but like a family dinner, where we love one another, and share these elements, and give thanks for God’s loving kindness.

Now, I spoke that confession earlier to admit that I and other ministers may be red herrings, half-truth tellers, or liars, and to point out that the revelation of the

mystery is made manifest not in the words of the minister, or the training, or ordination, or by the authority of the pastor. I went through all that to demonstrate that the church, that is, all of us united together and possessed by God's Spirit, the church has the insight to understand and reveal the mystery of God's love for us and for the world.

The mystery is revealed in our lives of loving, of loving one another, of loving others unlike us. Verse 10 says that the "manifold wisdom of God" is made known through the church; so then, it is not a secret knowledge, hidden from other people, with a password or mystical signs; it is not a personal knowledge that only a few can discover, but it is what we do together, accepting and caring for, trusting our Lord even in suffering, understanding the selfless majesty of Christ's love, so that we might give him praise, and like the Apostle himself, bow down in thanks for brothers and sisters who take on the name of the Father, just as we do.

This mystery is known in the church, everywhere God's people love one another; this mystery, the knowledge of God, must be proclaimed by the church, everywhere people are hurting. The church is everywhere people come together to give thanks for what God has done in Jesus Christ, where the walls are broken

down, and where the amazing grace of the Father is experienced and shared and passed on.