

1st Sunday after Epiphany
January 11, 2015

Pastor Michael Ewart
Sermon Text: Ephesians 3:2-12

UNEDITED DRAFT

Heirs, Members, and Sharers Together

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our world is one where people are divided. Human pride is the reason for most of this division. We have this innate arrogance that thinks I am better than most others, and "my people" (however you define that) are better than other people. Some people feel their race is superior, their gender, their socio-economic class, people of their profession, people of their heritage, people of their family or tribe, people of their political party. Some even make it clear that they believe people who drive a certain kind of car are superior, or who adhere to a certain kind of diet, or who have common views about health or diet.

We are people who put up walls. We are people who like to stereotype and categorize. Pride leads us to this. And the sad truth is, it even exists within the church. There can be a lack of unity. There can be cliques and divisions and sides. The stupidest things can divide us. So today we're going to see just what God says about that.

We're going to see this in a section of Scripture that addresses a division that had occurred in the early Christian church. There was a division between Jews and Gentiles. Let me just take a moment to explain why this was the case. In the Old Testament, Jews were by God's plan and design, separate from the Gentiles.

You see, when Adam and Eve fell into sin, God promised them he would fix what they broke. So there are only two ways to attempt to get into a right relationship with God. You can try to fix it. Or God can fix it. You can rely upon yourself to make things right. Or you can rely upon God to make things right. Faith is that connection to God through which his gift of forgiveness is received. Without faith, a person stands fully accountable before God for all their wrongs and wickedness.

Because faith is necessary for salvation, it would not do any good for God to send a Savior if there was no one on the planet who would believe in that Savior. The wickedness of the world at the time of the flood already indicated men's wickedness and inclination toward unbelief. It didn't take long for the descendants of Noah to head down the same path. At the tower of Babel, man's pride and wickedness again came to the front. And so God created multiple languages and scattered people around the world.

What could God do so that when the time came to send the Savior, there would be at least a few expecting him, and yearning for him, and then trusting in him? God in his wisdom came up with the plan to isolate a particular people. They would be different than the other nations. They would worship different, and be governed differently, and behave differently. They would be God's special people and would receive special revelation from God.

And so God called Abraham out of all the people on earth. He was an old man with no children and God promised him that he would be the father of a great nation, and that all people on earth would be blessed through him. And God did exactly as he promised. Abraham had a son named Isaac. Isaac who had a son named Jacob. Jacob, whom God himself renamed as "Israel" had

12 sons. And with them, a population explosion began. From them came the 12 tribes of Israel. Over the course of 400 years the people multiplied into a nation of a couple million.

God gave them special laws at Mt. Sinai... laws that would keep them separate from the rest of the nations. Laws that would keep them focused and expecting God's final plan of salvation and deliverance through the Messiah.

Yet even within this privileged, sheltered, hedged nation, there was great apostasy, rebellion, stubbornness and unbelief. God sent judges and prophets and priest and leaders to call the people back to himself again and again. They reminded the people of the coming Messiah who save the people from their sins.

And when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law. And when Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph believed he was the Savior. And shepherds believed he was the Savior. And Anna and Simeon believed he was the Savior. God's plan worked! (As if that should surprise us.) There were those who were expecting the Christ, and recognized the Christ and believed in the Christ.

Thanks for being patient through all that Bible history. Now the question in the early church was: now what? God brought about his plan of salvation. Jesus was a Jew and primarily preached to the Jews. So now what?

With the background we just outlined, perhaps we now understand better why the Jews didn't really understand that Jesus was not the Savior of the Jews, but the Savior of all nations. We can sort of understand why many believed there was still the dividing wall between Jews and all other nations. We can sort of understand why some thought the Messiah would come to wage war on the heathen nations and would be a conquering hero. We can sort of understand why some expected that in order to be saved, a person would have to become like a Jew, be circumcised like a Jew, follow all of the customs and worship traditions of the Jews, and eat, dress and live like a Jew. And behind this idea of division within the church was simply this: human pride.

So what does God say of our tendency to categorize and divide and pigeon hole? Let's look at our reading today in Ephesians 3. Before we do, know that this section is closely tied to 2:11-22. It was in those verses that Paul first outlined the truth that God unites all people. It says that those who were far away (Gentiles) have been brought near through the blood of Christ. Paul says that Jews and Gentiles are both reconciled to God through the cross. There is no difference. And both have access to the Father through the same Spirit. Both Jew and Gentile are built into the same building, a holy temple in the Lord, where Christ is the cornerstone and the preaching of the apostles and prophets is the foundation.

Then we have chapter three which begins.

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles...” But Paul doesn't finish his sentence. He interrupts himself at this point. In fact, he doesn't continue what he was going to say until 3:14 where we see that Paul was getting ready to pray for Ephesian Christians. But it seems as he was about to pray, he felt the need to stop himself and teach and explain further just how important it is that we understand and believe the unity we have in the church as the body of Christ. Perhaps he feels the phrase would not be understood: , **“the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles.”** So he interrupts himself and expounds on what he means that he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles.

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly.

4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.

Paul received a special grace from God and a special revelation from God. God showed Paul with crystal clarity something that had been hidden and was unknown to others. It was surely hinted at in the Old Testament, but people didn't grasp its full meaning. It was Paul's call, responsibility and privilege to clearly reveal and preach this mystery. And what is it?

6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

The mystery, which he already explained in chapter 2, but feels compelled to elaborate on further here is this: That Jews and Gentiles are one body in Christ. They are "**Heirs, Members, and Sharers Together.**"

Paul continues by explaining what a privilege it was for him to be the one to share this mystery with the world:

7 I became a servant [humility! God is master, Paul performs service for the master] **of this gospel by the gift of God's grace / given me through the working of his power.** [Paul never failed to appreciate all God had done for him. From persecutor of Christ and his followers, to servant and messenger of Christ

8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: (1) to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and (2) to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

Two aspects of grace were given to Paul. First, to preach *to the Gentiles* the boundless riches of Christ. To Gentiles of all people! Preach what? The boundless riches of Christ. This is what I am privileged to preach to you, friends. Christ has stored up boundless riches for everyone on the planet. By faith in him, you are connected to Christ and all his riches. Those riches are poured out on you!

And he was privileged to preach about the unity of the church – no division between Jew and Gentile – because of the work of Christ Jesus.

10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. [This refers to the angels in heaven. God's plan and wisdom in that Jews and Gentiles would be together as one was not even known the angels. It was something they saw unfold as well. By the way there are other passages of Scripture that make it clear that the angels watch and take great interest in God's salvation plan among mankind. Even though this doesn't directly affect them, they praise God for his goodness, grace and wisdom in that we sinful human beings are rescued by God in Christ Jesus.

So understand that God knew what he was doing from the start. But he did not reveal it to men or angels... together we have seen his amazing plan unfold.]

12 In him [Christ Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. 13 I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Paul describes the privilege we have as one body connected to the one Christ. We can approach God with freedom and confidence. And it shouldn't discourage us one bit if we must suffer or be imprisoned in defense of this glorious truth.

With all of that out of the way, now Paul feels like he can pray for the Ephesians, and his prayer continues in the very next verse. Because he shared the good news that not only are we one with God through Christ, but also one with every other believer, he was arrested. Jews were offended at this teaching and Paul was arrested specifically because of this message. It's an amazing prayer, you need to read it! But it is outside of the scope of today's discussion.

So what can we draw from this fascinating part of Scripture for us today? 1) All alike are sinners undeserving of his grace and kindness. The Jews of Paul's day through they were more deserving of God's grace than the Gentile sinners. They thought they had an advantage. But they didn't. Today, we tend to think the same way. We are just a bit more deserving of God's grace and forgiveness than... my next door neighbor... my brother... that race... that country (we tend to think of America as a country more worthy of God's favor)... that political party (does God really love Republicans more than Democrats? Or Vice versa? No one has more of an advantage before God than anyone else. The truth is the sin in your life is every bit as damning as the sins in anyone else's life. We all alike have rebelled and deserve wrath and punishment.

2) But God has poured out his grace and offers his gifts to everyone equally as well. Christ died on the cross for every last one of my sins... and your sins... and the sins of Russians... and the sins of the 1% richest people... and the sins of whites, blacks and every shade in between. Jesus perfect life an innocent death on the cross was the full payment for all sin. All who turn from sin to Christ... that is, all who repent... have all the gifts God gives through Jesus shed blood. There is no difference.

The big idea? The mystery is really a two part mystery. (1) You have been made one with God through the shed blood of his own Son, Jesus Christ. But Paul here really focuses more on the second part of the mystery. 2) The church is perfectly united without division, class, or rank through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

So we have a vertical unity established by Christ. But we also dare not lose sight of the other part of the great mystery and that is that we also have horizontal unity through the Lord Jesus Christ.

By the way, it bears mentioning that there is only one thing that actually does divide believers. Since it is faith that unites, and our faith is in Christ and his Word, then where there are those who teach falsely about Christ or his Word, a division forms. The false teachers put up a wall of division, separating themselves from those who truly follow Christ and his Word. The Bible is very clear that we should not unite with those who believe and teach wrongly about Christ or his Word. That said...

Friends, rejoice at this mystery that has been revealed. That helpless baby born in Bethlehem has been revealed to be the Savior *of the world*. Not just people who **look** like us and **talk** like us and **walk** like us and **dress** like us and **live** near us. No, Jesus is the Savior of all. Treasure this glorious mystery: The one, indivisible church is not a denomination. It is not a building. It is not built on money, or programs or methods. It is the one church that is made up of all who truly rely on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who submit to Christ and all of his teachings. Jesus Christ himself built the one Church and he did it **by** himself, **on** himself, **for** himself and **of** himself.

In Christ we are **Heirs, Members, and Sharers Together**

Are you willing to give, to pray, to go, to talk, to preach, to teach this mystery, no matter what the cost?. Paul was. This mystery is good news, people. Good news! God calls on us to declare it. Amen.