

Tracy Daub
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Ephesians 3:1-12

MYSTERIES REVEALED

We all love a good mystery. Mystery stories keep us in suspense, trying to figure out the answer as to who was the killer, who was the thief, what really happened. And mysteries all build to the point when there is the revealing, the moment when what was hidden from our understanding is revealed. That is what the word "epiphany" means. It means a manifestation. What was hidden is now revealed. What was obscure is now made clear. When we speak about having "an epiphany" we speak about having a sudden insight.

Today as we celebrate Epiphany Sunday, we are celebrating the revealing of a mystery--a manifestation of knowledge that had been previously unknown. We are given new insight.

Traditionally, Epiphany Sunday is when we have recalled the visitation of the magi to the baby Jesus. What made their visit to Jesus remarkable was not only that they were travelers from far away, or that they were likely to be wealthy--given the expensive gifts they gave to Jesus. What made their visit noteworthy was that these wise men were Gentiles. They were not Jewish. And still they came to bow before this impoverished Jewish baby boy. Gentiles figured into this astonishing story of God's love revealed to the world.

This is the great mystery that the Apostle Paul speaks about in his letter to the Ephesians, the mystery that Gentiles were also included in God's plans for salvation.

Now, this seems like a no-brainer to us today. This inclusion of the Gentiles as recipients of God's saving love hardly seems like earth-shattering news to us today. But we must remember that it was not inevitable that the Christian Church would include Jews and Gentiles as equals in the family of faith. We must remember the deep divisions that existed at that time

between Jews and Gentiles. This division may seem like ancient history to us today--but it has bearings upon how we followers of Jesus today understand God's calling to us.

To understand the radical nature of this epiphany we must recall a few basics. First, Jesus was Jewish, as were his disciples, and as were the early followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection. Jewish people were the followers of the one God, Yahweh--the God of Israel, the God who had made a covenant with them. Gentiles, however, were pagans. They worshipped multiple gods. Their ancestry didn't go back to those early people called by God--Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob. Gentiles did not follow God's commandments, live according to the laws given to Moses, or follow the traditions or rituals that were part of the family of faith. From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were completely, one hundred percent "other." Jews and Gentiles lived in proximity to one another, but they kept themselves apart. They didn't socialize together, eat together, associate together.

But then following Jesus' death and resurrection, an astonishing thing begins to happen. Some Gentiles begin to believe in Jesus. Some Gentiles begin to accept Jesus as God's son. Some Gentiles become converts to the Way of Jesus. And the Apostle Paul had a lot to do with this. Paul understood that he had been given a special calling by God to proclaim the good news of God's love as revealed in Jesus among the Gentile world. And Gentiles began to become converts.

This is the amazing epiphany that Paul talks about in this letter to the Ephesians. That Gentiles could be recipients of God's salvation, of God's love and grace, was a great and astonishing revelation. Gentiles were so much outsiders to the family of faith that it stretched comprehension to imagine their inclusion in God's family. Imagine the patriarch of a family making out a will that names his heirs--those who will inherit his blessings and gifts. The family

carries on year after year, understanding who are the heirs, who are the recipients of the blessings and gifts of the family leader. And then suddenly one day, a whole new group of people--people who were previously considered outsiders--are added to the will. But their addition to the will in no way shortchanges those who were previously named as heirs because, as the Apostle Paul writes, "there are boundless riches of Christ." There is plenty of love to go around. And according to Paul, this inclusion of the Gentiles was not an afterthought by God. God didn't just add them into the will like a post script to a letter. Rather, Paul tells us that God's plan for salvation included the Gentiles from the very beginning of time. The epiphany then is that the boundaries around who is welcomed and loved by God, who is part of the "family" is bigger than anyone had ever understood.

This revelation has major implications on our walk of faith. Many of us think about faith as a vertical relationship between ourselves and God. We may think about our faith as doing those things that will strengthen this vertical relationship between God and us--things such as going to church, praying, giving our money and time, following God's commandments, and so forth. But the epiphany that comes to us with the birth of Jesus, the epiphany that is revealed by the wise men's visit and by the Apostle Paul's ministry among the Gentiles, suddenly expands the framework of our faith. No longer is our faith just a vertical relationship between ourselves and God, but it is now revealed that our faith includes a horizontal dimension: between ourselves and other human beings. The mystery of God's love is that we are all included in it. That means everyone. Everyone. We are all in need of God's love and forgiveness. And that gift is given to everyone.

What this means is that Jesus' coming into the world wasn't just so that you and I as individuals might know we are loved by God and saved by God's love. That *is* true--we *are*

loved by God and saved by that love. But that is not all that Jesus' coming was meant to convey. His coming was also to bring about a new humanity. The bringing together of peoples who were once estranged is part of God's saving work of reconciling us with God. We can't have the vertical relationship with God if we are neglecting the horizontal relationship with one another.

This unity between Jews and Gentiles in the early Church was a terribly complex matter. It didn't happen easily. There were all kinds of conflicts, all kinds of problems, all kinds of issues from small to large. We might be able to appreciate that complexity if we think about the complex issues in this nation between blacks and whites. Or if we think of the complex issues between Israelis and Palestinians. Or when we think of our own families and the complex relationships we have with the members of our family. Oneness in the human family is terribly challenging. But the Apostle Paul understood that through Jesus we have been given a new insight into the heart of God. God's grace, God's saving love, is vast and inclusive. And thus, ours is to be as well. Paul declared that it is the Church's calling to witness to the wisdom of God's inclusive love. In other words, we, you and I, are to endeavor to live out the new humanity made possible through Christ. We are to focus on the horizontal relationships if we want to have a meaningful vertical relationship with our God.

And this is where the mystery gets interesting. In most mystery stories, once the mystery is revealed, the story is over. But not in this case. The mystery of God's inclusive love is revealed to us but this is not the ending but rather the beginning of our story. For how will we carry out this love? How will we live out our new humanity? How will we seek to bring together a greatly divided people and work to overcome the divisions of poverty, class, race, religion, work to heal old wounds, work to forgive those who have wronged us, work to accept differences? The mystery of the God who makes all things possible is waiting to be revealed in your life. May this be the year of epiphanies.