Letters from Prison: Ephesians wk1– A New People

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If you know me well-you know that I really enjoy movies. Some of my favorite movies are the ones that have that “aha” moment. You know what I’m talking about – something comes to light and gives new meaning to what you’ve been seeing all along; there’s a twist that you just didn’t see coming-but maybe should have. Movies like the Sixth Sense or one of my all time favorites- Shawshank- have these moments where they even flash back and show you things they’ve shown you before but now it makes more sense; and you’re like – “Why didn’t I see that coming?”

Today we are going to look at one of those kinds of things in scripture. It’s something that Paul calls the “Mystery of Christ.” And as we will see it is something that God had been alluding to from the beginning; and now through Jesus this mystery should be plain to us.

To do that we are going to be spending the next 6 weeks in what we call the book of Ephesians. Over the last year we have been looking at a series of letters that Paul wrote from Prison-and this is our last one.

There are two reasons that we have spent so much time on these letters from Prison this year. First, I want to help develop our Biblical literacy, meaning that we need to better understand what we have in the Bible, how it is put together and what it ties together so that we can accurately apply it to our lives.

Secondly, I believe that we need to understand that the call to discipleship has always been a demanding and challenging one-a call that would lead Jesus’ followers to great and willing sacrifice from the first generation…and they would still encourage us to follow whatever the cost; and Paul could say that because he fully understood that cost.

Ephesus was a very important city in the Roman Empire. It was on the western coast of modern day Turkey and it was the crossroads of 2 major trade routes. It was where east met west; and as such was a place where many religious ideas and practices collided. Ephesus was the home to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World- a temple to the Goddess Artemis or Diana, it was 4 times the size of the Parthenon.

Paul visited Ephesus on his 2nd missionary journey that is recorded in Acts – we’ve said almost all of these letters are written during these years that are covered in Acts. In Acts 19, Paul visits the city and after first preaching to the Jewish synagogue which initially rejected his teaching on the resurrection of Jesus-he began to teach in a theater; and stayed preaching and teaching for almost 3 years in the city.

Ephesus is mentioned in several NT Scriptures – Acts- told of a tearful farewell when Paul meets with the Elders on his way back to Jerusalem (where he would eventually be arrested…and sent to Rome where he wrote many of these letters).

1 & 2 Timothy – Timothy is left to develop the Elders and pastor the churches in Ephesus until in 2 Timothy Paul asks him to come to him.

Revelation – One of the 7 churches mentioned, told to return to it’s first love.

One of the things that is really interesting about this letter, is that for all of Paul’s familiarity with the city and the church there, there is no shout out to any particular person/worker- or no reference to a particular issue or problem in the church. Some people find that really surprising-the most likely reason for it is that this is a letter that was intended to be kind of a circular-distributed and passed to the churches in the region.

Because the letter doesn’t address any one person or particular church issue-it is a great overview of some of the major themes of what the message of the Gospel is and how that plays out in daily life.

So we are going to look at some of the major themes for the next 6 weeks, and it won’t necessarily be in chronological order, because some of the themes are repeated throughout the letter-and that makes them really important.

Today we are going to look at a theme of unity that runs through the letter-Paul calls it a mystery 7 times… We are a **NEW People in Jesus!**

14 times in Ephesians Paul uses the phrase- “In Christ.” 8 more times he says, “in Him.”

He is writing to churches that were ethnically diverse-in a very diverse culture; and saying that no matter your background, ethnicity, nationality, social status- and in other places gender-God is making a new people in Jesus.

**Ephesians 2:14-15 CSB For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, 15he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace.**

Derwin Gray is a former NFL Defensive back and a church planter-got to meet him at the NACC here in KC 2017 – wrote a book called The High Definition Leader- in which his main point is that the church should be ethnically diverse, and when we continue to recreate homogenous – whether they be white, black, Asian or Hispanic churches…that we are missing what God was doing; and Paul’s message in Ephesians.

He says this, “**Jesus’ epic salvific work creates a third ethnicity of people called the church. This new ethnicity is a multiethnic people who are one in Christ. This new ethnicity in Christ is a glimpse of eternity. The local churches in Ephesus were hope to the world that there is a better and more beautiful way to be human.**

The words US and Them – are really divisive and it’s also something that most of us gravitate to. To the Jewish way of thinking there were 2 kinds of people, 2 races – the Jews and Gentiles-everybody else…

It isn’t just the Jews who thought that way. Greeks often saw everyone else as primitive and uneducated Barbarians. Throughout history most cultures, countries, and kingdoms saw the world similarly-it was us and them.

The Jewish mindset came to be this way because they believed that because they were descendants of the promise God had given Abraham in Genesis 12 when God promised to make his descendants into a great nation. And they had been blessed as they got to see God working up close in their history and they had received His law…but they missed a nugget in the promise-one of those things that like I mentioned earlier, in hindsight was there all along and changes how they should have seen the story.

After God promises to make Abram’s descendants into a great nation-the promise ends by God promising to “**bless on the peoples on earth through you.”**

The Jews had assumed the other nations would be blessed by watching them prosper –by people coming to fear God because he would favor them… And even as they turned away from God’s commands; were punished by other nations capturing them…they still thought the blessing was for them…maybe if other nations converted to the Law and became Jews then they would be saved; would know God.

But as Tracy illustrated last week-Jesus made it plain that his plan was for everyone-even demonstrating that by revealing who he was for the first time to a Samaritan outcast woman.

Jesus told his disciples that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth-but they stay in Jerusalem…maybe thinking they would preach to the Jews dispersed around the world.

Peter is stunned when God sends him to a Gentile’s house-even more when the Holy Spirit shows up in them…

Jesus himself tells Paul that he is going to be a messenger to the Gentiles. And as he looks back on all the promises of God in the Hebrew scriptures-and what he knew of the ministry of Jesus, and what Jesus sent him to do-***it’s like the movie suddenly makes sense***!

This is what God was doing all along! He was bringing us all together! **He took Us and Them and changed it to We In Him!**

NT Wright says of this passage in Ephesians – “**The point of it all, as he says in verse 15, was to create a single new humanity in place of the two. Today’s church may no longer face the question of the integration of Jew and Gentile into a single family, though there are places where that is still a major issue. But we face, quite urgently, the question which Paul would insist on as a major priority. If our churches are still divided in any way along racial or cultural lines, he would say that our gospel, our very grasp of the meaning of Jesus’ death, is called into question.”**

In other letters Paul talks about the church being the body of Christ. One of the longest passages being in 1 Corinthians 12. And if you study it closely, you begin to understand that he isn’t just being symbolic-because the Holy Spirit lives in his people-all of his followers, that means that we physically are his body on earth.

**1 Cor. 12:25-26 NIV …there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.**

We have brothers and sisters-parts of the body, that have suffered and too often we have not had equal concern for the body of Christ…because we saw/see – different bodies/colors/foreigners –

When we take the “We” that Jesus made out of us and them…and revert back to spaces where we don’t reflect the multiethnic community, we lose an incredibly valuable part of our story, our witness – of how Jesus has taken down the walls of hostility, the things that divide us and put us together in him in his new Kingdom.

This kingdom did not bring us together by simply bringing different kingdoms and cultures to submission – he put to death that way of thinking on the cross- and this kingdom is in him.

The letter to Ephesians begins with a long prayer in chapter 1 and in it Paul talks about all of these things that we have now that we are “in Him.”

In Him – we are **blessed**; I Him- we are **chosen**; in him we are **predestined (adopted**); in him we are **given grace**; in him- we are **given understanding of this mystery**; in him – we are **in unity** Under Him.

This mystery-this new ethnicity, the church- is such an amazing thing, that Paul keeps talking about it and it prompts worship as he just thinks and writes about it.

NT Wright again – talking about this prayer- says, “**True worship of the true God cannot help telling and retelling, with joy and amazement, the story of what this God has done in Jesus the Messiah**.” When you think about what God has done- not because of your background; race, ethnicity, or favorite method of sin- that he has made you new-offered to make you new if you haven’t taken him up on it.

So what do we do with all of that? – If you haven’t considered/taken Jesus up on this idea that he is inviting you into a relationship with God through Him-that he has done the work and wants to make you new…

I would ask you to examine your relationship circle-does that circle reflect anyone of difference race, culture, class than you? Pray this week for ways to see people of a different ethnicity as your brother/sister –…part of the body.

Pray for Northside to be a church that reflects our communities diversity and for us to have the courage as a body to take steps to make a present reality, what God has shown us will be a future reality.