

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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God Has Put Us Together

Ephesians 3:1-13

No one can ever accuse Paul of lacking focus. Even when sticking to his mission and staying on message meant spending time behind bars, Paul refused to diverge from what he believed God had called him to do. In today's Scripture passage from Ephesians, an imprisoned Paul assumes that his Gentile hearers already know quite a bit about his single-minded devotion to spreading the gospel. They're already familiar with his unwavering concentration on what God has accomplished in Christ.

Paul calls it "the mystery of Christ" (v. 4). The thing is, it's a revealed mystery. It's an open secret. Through Jesus, God has unveiled his eternal purpose. He has disclosed what he has been up to all along, namely, to unite all things in Christ. In other words, God's purpose has always been to redeem the world and bring all things together under the reign of Christ.

According to Paul, one of the sure signs of this divine plan is the life of the church. Not just the fact that the church exists, but that it's composed of both Jews and Gentiles. In a world divided by races and ethnicities, this new kind of fellowship, made up of people from every nation integrated into one new community, is the result of God's creative, saving power. As Paul puts it in verse 6: "The 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."

Notice how, in this summary of his message, Paul repeats the word "together." The Gentiles are heirs *together* with Israel. Jews and non-Jews are members *together* of one body. They're sharers *together* in the promise. Where did all this togetherness come from? What makes it happen? According to Paul, it can be traced directly back to the cross. That's where God removed the barrier of sin that separated humanity from himself. What's more, the death of Jesus tore down the wall that divided Jews and non-Jews. Jesus' purpose, says Paul, was "to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (2:15b-16).

So togetherness in the church doesn't come cheap. It took the death of the Messiah to restore peace and make a way forward. There's no way that we, in our own power and strength, could accomplish the kind of unity that God has always intended, from before the beginning of time. Unity between himself and us, and unity among us. If there's going to be that kind of togetherness, in the fullest and deepest sense of the word, it can only come at God's initiative, by God's mercy, toward God's goal. That's the mystery that has been revealed in Christ.

If you follow the current political debates, you know that there's plenty of discussion about walls, namely, where to build them and who's going to pay for them. As God's people, living in a world where we still have to argue about the location and cost of walls, we also

need to remember that the death of Jesus created the church by tearing down walls, so that the church could be a preview of a heavenly world where walls of separation won't be necessary. That's part of why we're assembled here this morning, to continue pointing toward and living toward that heavenly realm. And as we do, we need to remember that the reason we as a church are together is because God has put us together. It's not primarily about how we have chosen to be with one another, but about how God has called us and assembled us through Christ. In fact, you probably wouldn't know most of the people who are gathered here with you this morning, and wouldn't be involved in this type of community, apart from the barrier breaking power of the gospel.

Left to ourselves, we tend to gravitate toward people who think like us and act like us. We tend to want to be with and associate with people who resemble us, ethnically, racially, economically, educationally, and so on. This can lead to congregations that look and sound more like local affinity groups, rather than being diverse gatherings of individuals who have been reconciled to one another through the cross. One of the most destructive things about sin is its power to push us apart, to separate us from God and from one another. The gospel, by contrast, aims to bring us together, to unite us with God and with one another.

Wherever there's fragmentation, the good news of Jesus Christ aims to bring healing and wholeness. I use the term "fragmented" because it seems to be one of the adjectives most frequently applied to contemporary life. The world itself is so fragmented, as different nations and groups of people live in alienation from one another and hostility toward one another. Our own country is so fragmented by socioeconomic differences and rival ideologies. Our families are fragmented by the demands of daily life and the breakdown of household structures. The church itself, which God has created to be the embodiment of reconciliation and unity, is still so fragmented into different denominations and competing fellowships. Our personal lives are fragmented by the stresses of contemporary society and the pursuit of individual objectives.

There are so many of us who feel like our lives just don't hold together the way that they should or the way that God intends them to. It's as if our lives are busted up into little pieces, without a sense of oneness or wholeness. Our time is carved up into tiny pieces. Our resources are scattered here and there. Our energy is distributed in so many different directions. Our attention is divided up into a little bit of focus on this or a little bit of focus on that, until there's really no focus at all. It begins to feel like our lives are one big experiment in multitasking.

We normally think of multitasking as a way to get more done. Going through your emails while also watching your favorite television show, while also listening to your child, while also replying to a text message. Or listening to your audio Bible, while also driving in rush hour traffic, while also planning what's for dinner, while also praying for your neighbor. But according to a group of researchers at Stanford University, our multitasking may not be as productive as we think. The university's news service announced the study this way: "Attention, multitaskers (if you can pay attention, that is): Your brain may be in trouble." Though the researchers originally set out to discover what gave multitaskers their special focus, the researchers were surprised to learn that in many ways multitasking actually impairs performance. So when we think we're effective at juggling multiple tasks, we may actually be pretty lousy at it. The project found that multitaskers are suckers for distraction and irrelevancy. They're also more unorganized in their ability to keep and retrieve information, and even worse at the one thing that defines multitasking, namely, switching from one task to the next. The article based on the study concluded with this advice: "By doing less, you might accomplish more."¹

I don't know if Paul would have been considered a multitasker, but I do know that his simple, singular attention to the gospel, and to the church it produced, accomplished a lot. The evidence was right there in front of him, in the ethnically diverse and economically mixed congregations to which he wrote his letters. These churches certainly had more progress to make in practicing the peace of Christ accomplished in the cross. In their own ways, they were still fragmented fellowships full of fragmented people who were seeking some kind of centeredness and some kind of assurance that no hostile spiritual forces could separate them from the Father. Maybe some of our own feelings of being fragmented come from our sense that our lives are vulnerable to powers and forces that can threaten to undo us and pull us apart from God and from one another.

That's why we need to keep before us Paul's God-given vision of the church, its life, and its purpose. Remember that we're part of a diverse fellowship that's created to live as if the present world, with all its division and fragmentation, has already come to an end. As one person has put it, the church is "supposed to picture to the world what a heavenly family looks like on earth, now."² As we do that, we provide a visible, living testimony to how God can take what has been broken apart, separated, fragmented, and put it back together.

I believe that's one of the reasons we come here each Sunday, because in the worship and work of our congregation, we meet and experience a God who is able to take our fragmented lives and put us back together, uniting what's seems to so easily come apart. A few years ago, in a piece on the importance of spiritual disciplines, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wrote about two deep desires regularly expressed by Christians in America. One of them was the cry for justice, the kind of justice that makes for true peace in the world. The other desire he described this way: "We long for a community where we know we belong. Stretched by fast-paced work, a high-tech social life, and a constant flood of information, Americans feel fragmented and alone. We ache for home."³

Fragmented and alone. In Christ, God has acted to restore what was broken, to heal what was torn, to unite what was divided. He's still at work piecing us back together in our individual lives, and taking our individual lives and uniting them with the lives of others to form our church. Once again on this another Lord's Day, God is implementing the peace of Christ, within us and among us. That's what we recall as we prepare to gather at the Lord's Table. It is indeed a place of remembrance.

But let me adjust that word "remember." We not only *remember* in the sense of recalling the past, the peace accomplished once for all in the cross. We also *re-member* in the sense of trusting God to take all the pieces and parts, the members of our broken and damaged lives, and re-member them. That is, put the members back together into what he intends us to be in Christ. Put us back together as individuals. Put us back together as a unified people. That's where our fragmented lives find wholeness and home.

¹ "Researchers Find that Multitaskers Perform Poorly." PreachingToday website. Accessed March 3, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/november/1110110.html>>.

² Rodney Reeves, *Spirituality According to Paul: Imitating the Apostle of Christ* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2011) 102.

³ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Anne Graham Lotz, and Dallas Willard. "What Classic Spiritual Discipline Needs the Most Renewal Among American Christians?" Christianity Today website. March 12, 2013. Accessed March 3, 2016 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/march/what-classic-spiritual-discipline-needs-most-renewal-among.html?share=6P9Gj288m+bEqsy1H4pBuo2Uv49gul8g>>.