Heart Problem

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 3:1-13

October 15, 2017
So what are these? Jumbo Shrimp. Virtual Reality. Working Vacation.

Yes, oxymorons! From the Greek, oxys - sharp and moros - stupid. An oxymoron means pointedly foolish; an oxymoron is a combination of put-together, contradictory words—Soft Rock, Tight Slacks, Non-Fat Ice Cream!

Here is an oxymoron for our purposes this morning: Gentile Christian.

The first 13 verses of Chapter 3 of Paul’s Ephesus letter (I cannot overstate this enough) is an announcement that is radical to the people reading this letter in 60-61 AD. The announcement is a pointedly foolish one: Gentiles are now welcome/included alongside Jewish believers in Christ’s new community. How could this be? It is an oxymoron! Polytheistic Pagans (people worshipping many gods) now believing in one God—one God in Three? Completely radical. Gentiles now welcome into God’s family? Unbelievable!

The beautiful thing is that God chose a kind of oxymoron man to make this happen. Get this: Paul is a Jew who is a Roman; Paul is fluent in Hebrew and Greek. Paul grows up in the heart of a Gentile city, Tarsus. He is steeped in Gentile society and Paul is meticulously trained in Judaic law. Paul is a Hebrew by birth, but he is now spending more than half of his missionary time, two out of his three trips, in Gentile-dominant Ephesus. God uses this oxymoron man—a blood-thirsty Pharisee persecuting the Church, who meets the Risen
Jesus face-to-face and ends up setting the Gentile-world on fire for Christ. God appoints this oxymoron man as the “Apostle to the Gentiles”—to those (another oxymoron) Idol-Worshipping Jesus-Followers!

Ephesians 3:1-8 – God’s Mysterious Plan Revealed: *When I think of all this, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the benefit of you Gentiles,* assuming, by the way, that you know *God gave me the special responsibility of extending His grace to you Gentiles.* Gentiles are named four times in eight verses! This chapter 3 is Paul’s celebration of Christ in the life of new Gentile-Christs. God be praised!

3 As I briefly wrote earlier, God Himself revealed God’s mysterious plan to me. 4 As you read what I have written, you will understand my insight into this plan regarding Christ. 5 God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now by God’s Spirit He has revealed it to God’s holy apostles and prophets.

Three times Paul uses the Greek word *mystery.* It is key to our entire understanding this morning. In the English *mystery* is something dark, obscure, secretive. In the Greek *mystery* is, yes, still secretive but not obscured, not hidden. “Mysterion” is a truth that was once a secret to human understanding but is now revealed, uncovered by God for all to see. It is like a light being turned on in the darkness; like the morning sun rising up out of the night. This is the glorious *mystery* revealed, now clear as day! (Stott)
Verse 6: *And this is God’s plan:* [Here is the mystery revealed] Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News (#1) share equally in the riches inherited by God’s children. Both are (#2) part of the same body, and both (#3) enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus.

As the British Anglican scholar John Stott says, “Gentile readers in Ephesus must have read Paul’s letter with joyful amazement” (p.114). Jews and Gentiles are now one people, worshipping one God-in-three. What is the *mystery*? The *mystery* is that the Gentiles—every tribe, language, people, every nation—the Gentiles are now included in all the promises God made to Israel 3,000 years before! Gentiles are now recipients of the (v.8) “boundless riches” of Christ the Messiah (John Piper, 10/10/2010).

“In verse 6, Paul uses the prefix *syn* meaning “together with” three times. First, because of Christ’s death and resurrection, Gentiles and Jews are, together (heirs) in God’s family, together sons and daughters. Second, Gentiles and Jews are together members of the same Body. And, third, Gentiles and Jews are together partakers of God’s promise of a grace-filled life without end. Here is the truth about this *mystery* revealed: If God hadn’t done in Paul what Paul would do for the Gentiles, then you and I might still be worshipping Greek and Roman gods. Or, you and I might still be following a fledgling religion called Christianity—just a small sect within Judaism. Straight up, 2,000 years later, two billion
people would not be, in one way or another, identifiably “Christian” (Bart Ehrman, BeliefNet.com).

Gentiles in the 1st-century attempting to convert to Jewish-Christianity just was not working. Paul saw these Jewish practices as obstacles; obstacles that blocked Gentiles from coming to Christ into His united community. Requirements for inclusion in Christ’s new community no longer had to be Jewish-specific requirements: like circumcision; or Sabbath-keeping; or eating certain foods. Yes, new Gentile believers had to give up worshipping idols, and they could no longer offer food in an idol’s temple (1 Corinthians 8 & 10). But now, Paul’s mission was about forming Christ in the hearts and minds of Gentiles on their own cultural terms, if you will, instead of the constraints of particular Jewish practices (V. George Shillington, Fall’91 DirectionJournal.org).

This new community rested on one single requirement: faith in Jesus Christ crucified and risen (1 Corinthian 15:1-4). Gentiles were welcomed into this new community by simply-yet-significantly confessing on their lips that the Risen-from-the-Dead Jesus Christ is Lord (Romans 10:9). In return, oh, the “endless treasures” of the Messiah for them, for us—co-heirs, co-partners, co-sharers in the promise. Friends, do we realize what God has done for us in Jesus? Are God’s promises to us as fresh and new as they were to those 1st century Gentiles hearing them?

- God gives us life.
- God forgives our sins.
• God gives us His Spirit.
• God reigns in righteousness.
• God will wipe out all evil and suffering from the world.
• God will raise us from the dead.
• God will make us everlastingly joyful in His new heaven and new earth!

Verses 7 and 8, Paul continues: 7 By God’s grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving Christ by spreading this Good News. 8 Though I am the least deserving of all God’s people, God graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ.

Paul’s privilege of serving Christ by spreading this Good News? It cost him, and big. Paul was passionate about bringing a translatable, accessible, no-barriers Gospel to the Gentiles in Ephesus. He spent a lot of time there and it got him jailed. Jewish authorities were bitterly threatened by Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. Even Roman officials were suspect of this new Gospel of a resurrected Jesus and His new way of worship (Acts 25-26). Paul’s response? To be even more satisfied to call himself a “prisoner for Christ Jesus, on behalf of the Gentiles” (v.1). Paul was willing to be persecuted. By-the-way, on Audio-Book I’ve recently listened to an exceptional book on modern-day persecuted Christians. It’s written by Nik Ripken, The Insanity of God.

So, the “So What”? As we think about our first requirement of confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, crucified and risen, I believe there is a
second requirement for us. Now that we have been given the *endless treasures* in Christ how will we, like Paul, share those treasures? How will we share the riches of the Good News to others? Even more direct, how will you and I be a witness for Jesus today—in flesh and bone, in word and action—with our hands, feet, voice, heart?

We have all kinds of ways here at VPC to witness for Jesus. We have our extra-ordinary efforts to the unreached Gentiles (if you will) in Haiti and Mexico, Cuba, Morocco and Burma, of all places. In April, Sue Hamblen and I are going to New Hope adoption centers and refugee camps in Bulgaria. We want 6-8 people to join us. And just 1.3 miles up Park Street, we’ve got new friendships and invested relationships and huge outreach potential right here in our own neighborhoods! It is our Cedar Center Ignite Initiative. Grace, Gratitude, Generosity. What about you and I—where will you and I be a witness for Jesus today and tomorrow?

On a Friday in early September, I was asked to pay a pastoral visit to a family in the Vienna Park apartments. A single, working, divorced mom had gotten word of the sudden death of the father of her three sons – two adult sons and one, a 10-year-old son, Stephen. Every Sunday was Stephen’s day to see his Dad and spend time with him. But that coming Sunday, Stephen would no longer be seeing his Dad. Instead, I was being asked by the family to deliver the crushing news to Stephen. So, I contacted one of our close friends, Gustavo, a lay pastor living in the apartments there,
to translate for me. There we were, Gustavo and I, gathered in the family’s small kitchen bringing Jesus’ compassion to Stephen and his brothers and their mom that Sunday afternoon. There were prayer, tears, even laughter, and encouragement—we were being a witness for Jesus that afternoon.

Every day, in the spirit of Paul, we are asked to remember *Christ’s endless treasures*. Every day we’re being asked to seize the *privilege of serving* Christ with word and action. Will you and I be silent today, or will we be witnesses today and tomorrow to Christ’s saving love and to His life that has no end?

Final oxymorons!
Power in Weakness  Last will be First  Mystery Known

**How** will you and I be a witness for Jesus today and tomorrow?

**Where** will you and I be a witness for Jesus today and tomorrow?