

# “Mysteries Made Known”

Matthew 2:1-12 and Ephesians 3:1-12

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I admit that it felt a little audacious asking Nancy to put “Mysteries Made Known” on the sermon board outside. If you came here this morning expecting me to unravel string theory or explain to you why we have such a thing as imaginary numbers or even answer that age-old question, “What really happened to Elvis?” you’re going to leave disappointed. In fact, *I’m* not making any mysteries known, I’m simply sharing the same revelation that has been passed on down through generations of disciples, that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the light and life of ALL people and that ALL people are included in God’s gracious love.

As obvious as that might sound to us sitting here today, it wasn’t obvious to many in the beginning of the church. There are glimpses of this mystery in the gospels and even in the Old Testament but remember that Jewish people understood themselves to be God’s chosen people, they kept themselves separated from Gentiles, anyone who wasn’t Jewish, as a matter of law and faith, and many who believed in Jesus thought he was sent for them specifically. In Acts we hear of the bitter arguments in the church about whether Gentiles should be included. In Galatians, one of the earliest books written, Paul laments the many conditions placed on those Gentiles who did wish to become part of the church.

In Ephesians, Paul, or more likely one of his apprentices but we’ll use Paul, seeks to reconcile Jewish and Gentile converts by making this mystery of God’s inclusive love known. As a Jewish person he speaks directly to Gentiles to help them understand who they are in light of Christ. It’s this gospel that he’s also proclaiming to Jewish people. Eugene Peterson interprets his witness this way:

The Messiah has made things up between us so that we’re now together, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders...Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the

Father... This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. (The Message, Ephesians 2, various)

I don't know about each of you, but I have never felt left out of God's love, there was a time in my life when I ran from it, thought I didn't need it, didn't understand the deep meaning of choosing to live in the light of it, but I have never felt that I was excluded from it. It's heartbreaking that there are people who have been told they cannot be loved by God because of who they are, who they love, their gender identity, their nationality, the color of their skin, their economic status, and more. It's blasphemy that there are people who have been told that the church, the body of Christ, isn't for them for the same reasons. But the Apostle Paul is very clear, the gospel of Jesus Christ demands that the church recognize God's love for all and seek to be fully inclusive.

In speaking of the Jewish/Gentile question, he says that Gentiles aren't just invited in to sit on the side or even at the kid's table. The church isn't *allowing* them to come in at all, Gentiles claim their rightful place. They are fellow heirs and therefore siblings. It's an elevated status for those who have been looked down upon by God's chosen people. But even though this was a difficult leap for early Jewish Christians, we should not judge them. It's been difficult for many of us to make the same leap with people we consider "other" today.

Now you likely know that Market Square Church includes in its mission statement the welcome of all people and specifically names many of those who haven't always been welcome in the church. For communities such as ours there are other challenges. We've already begun the leap in critical thinking that enables us to actively extend Christ's gracious invitation of welcome beyond what's been traditional for the church, the emotional leap is usually the harder. Even when we know intellectually that full inclusion is a fundamental Christian value, as people who are different from us begin to take their rightful places in the community, sometimes our emotions, and particularly our feelings of fear, get the better of us. "What about me? Will there still be space for me?" I admit I've felt this way myself as I've watched PCUSA work very hard toward full inclusion of people of color. My head and my heart want to be a part of what I know to be right, but my fear sometimes gets the better of me, especially because white, cis-gendered, heterosexual has been what's "normal" for so long. But I keep trying and praying for a continuously transforming heart.

Because without the emotional leap, there are important next steps that can't happen. Full inclusion isn't about checking boxes for all the different kinds of people present in our community. Full inclusion means much more than a pew from time to time.

Full inclusion in the church means baptism, membership, marriage, and ordination to leadership. PCUSA and Market Square Church have made this technically possible for all people who proclaim their belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but full inclusion really means that each person has a **sense of belonging**, is seen and embraced for who they are. The former "don't ask, don't tell policy," in our military regarding LGBTQ people, wasn't full inclusion. If we say we're

“color blind,” or that we teach our children “not to see color,” that’s not full inclusion. Both mean we’re ignoring an important and beautiful part of who someone is and conveniently ignoring how much people of color and the LGBTQ community too have suffered precisely *because* of these aspects of self. Full inclusion means equity and “equity is the process of ensuring that processes and programs provide equal possible outcomes for every individual recognizing that no one starts from the same place.”<sup>i</sup>

Full inclusion means that we acknowledge each person has a right to divulge information about their particular social, cultural, racial, economic, gender, and sexuality identity markers when and how they wish, but we have a responsibility for creating a space that feels safe enough to do so. Full inclusion means that people need to feel secure in the knowledge that their leadership is welcome and that they have some agency in shaping the community now and into the future, they also need to feel that the community values them when they lead from all of the experiences that have shaped them over time, not just the good ones.

The author of Ephesians says that it’s the task of the church to display the full wisdom of God in all our rich variety, to the world. He was willing to go to prison for that proclamation. We’re also called to bring this message to all the rulers and authorities of this world. And many of them are threatened by efforts toward Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. They’re afraid, just as Herod was afraid, when the Magi came to worship the Christ child.

DEI efforts are under attack but it’s right for the church, which means it’s right for our culture. If it takes rich variety and full inclusion to represent the Kin\_dom of God then God’s people need to work toward that in our own house *and* in our society both culturally and politically, no matter the risks. Are we prepared to become servants of this gospel as Paul was? It’s not easy and it’s often not comfortable, especially for those of us who are used to having our voices heard regularly, but the reconciliation of all people and full inclusion in the Kin\_dom of God is part of God’s eternal purpose first revealed to the world by a star hung in the sky and now, God willing, revealed through those who seek to cross barriers and dividing lines no matter the cost. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/september-27-2021/>