

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
January 5, 2020

Joining Jesus on His Mission

1. The Mission Mystery

2. The Mission Miracle

“Lord, take me where you want me to go; Let me meet who you want me to meet;
Tell me what you want me to say; And keep me out of your way. Amen.”

(The daily prayer of Father Mychal Judge, NYFD chaplain,
killed in the 9/11 attacks at the World Trade Center)

Ephesians 3:2-13

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This 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.

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Hindsight is 2020! Then it is obviously the year for hindsight.

The mystery of which Paul writes in verse six is really no mystery to us because we enjoy the benefit of 2020 hindsight. “This 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.” Of course, the Gentiles are included in God's plan of salvation. Most of us are of Gentile background.

But that wasn't nearly so obvious in the first century. There was a huge cultural gap between Jews and Gentiles. Jews didn't even eat with Gentiles. They were the ultimate lost cause.

In fact, it really shouldn't have been a mystery at all. This mystery was already revealed in the Old Testament.

- In Genesis 12:3, when God first calls Abraham, God makes a promise: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

- King Solomon repeated that promise in our psalm of the day: “All nations will be blessed through him” (Psalm 72:17).
- Isaiah spoke of it often. The mystery is found in Isaiah 49:6: “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

The fact that the “lost cause” Gentiles would be fellow heirs with the Israelites should have been no surprise at all. What made it hidden in the Old Testament? It was so contrary to the expectations of the people. The promises were there. We can see them plainly in hindsight. But it was so much more difficult to see for the people living in the time of the fulfillment.

That’s why Paul calls it “the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 3:3-5). Through the New Testament prophets and apostles, it was made clear that a person didn’t have to become a Jew and follow all the Jewish laws to be saved. Jesus came for all, even the “lost cause” Gentiles.

Today as we celebrate Epiphany, the coming of the Magi, we are celebrating the coming of the first Gentiles to worship the new born Savior. It is startling to realize that in Matthew’s gospel, written for people of Jewish background, the first people he records worshipping the Savior are these Gentiles. God was revealing the mystery: The Savior is for lost causes too.

John’s gospel certainly emphasizes that. “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). There are about half a dozen passages that use “world” in the sense that Jesus came to save the “world” or all people. But most of the uses of “world” are negative. The “world” did not recognize him (1:10). The “world” hated Jesus (7:7).

Ok, so what’s the point of all this? The Mission Mystery is that the Gospel is for lost causes! Jesus’ mission is not limited to the people we interact with in the comfort of our church or home. Jesus’ mission includes every person that we interact with, including the “lost causes.”

I think of my mother-in-law’s comments about the people who work at her assisted living facility. She mentions that many of them are living with their boyfriends and girlfriends. Several have children out-of-wedlock.

I am afraid it is easy for life-long Christians to look down on people like that just like the Jews looked down on the Gentiles. But this is the Mission Mystery! Jesus came for lost causes like that. They are in Jesus’ mission field.

A growing cultural divide in our communities is generational. The generations have different values. And everything that I read and I see says that many of the generational values of GenZ, those in college and younger, does not include a Christian worldview. For boomers like me, it is easy dismiss them as “lost causes.” But this is the Mission Mystery! Jesus came for lost causes. They are part of Jesus’ Mission. The only question is, “Are they in my mission field?”

Pastor Greg Finke in his book *Joining Jesus on His Mission* defines your neighborhood as “any network of people to which we have regular access. Who is regularly within your reach? Who are the people who live near you work near you, play near you, etc.?”

For my mother-in-law, her neighborhood is the staff and fellow residents in her assisted living facility. Jesus loves each of those people, including the lost causes.

For me, my neighborhood includes those Millennials and GenZs that are very different than I am. Jesus loves each of them, including the lost causes. They are part of his mission field.

And the Mission Miracle is that the Gospel is entrusted to me to share with the lost causes. I call it a mission miracle because like Paul, I am “the leaster.”

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ.

Paul calls himself “less than the least.” A commentary suggested the term “leaster.” The Mission Miracle is not, in my mind, that Jesus includes the “lost cause” Gentiles in His Mission. The Mission Miracle is that he invites me to join him on his mission! Because I too am a “leaster.”

Paul would call him a “leaster” because he could never forget where he had come from. He had been a persecutor of the church and a violent man. He continued to see the power of sin in his life so that he confessed, “The good that I want to do I do not do, but the evil that I do not want to do, that I do” (Romans 7).

I’m that kind of “leaster” too. It is easier for the older generation to look down on the younger. But don’t you have to confess with King David, “Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways”? (Psalm 25). I am less than the least because I have lived longer than most of the people that I interact with. That means that I’ve had more years and days and hours to sin against God. When I compare myself with a “lost cause” GenZ that I interact with at a store, I know that I’m the leaster – less than the least – because I’ve had more time to sin that she or he has.

How is that the “leaster” Paul was invited on Jesus’ mission? How is that you and I are? Look again at verse 7: “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.”

How did you become a part of God’s church? Was it because of the powerful persuasion of someone you interacted with? No! God’s grace was given to you “through the working of God’s power.”

The very fact that Jesus is inviting you on his mission is a reminder that your neighborhood mission work is not dependent on your powerful persuasion. The only one who can bring a person to faith is Jesus! So relax as you join Jesus’ on His mission. It doesn’t all depend on you.

And if you feel that you are not up to the task, relax! The “leaster” you are, the more colors of God’s wisdom you have to share.

¹⁰ His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The word “manifold” is literally “multi-colored.” That’s part of what leads me to think of a bag of M&M’s. They are lots of different colors – but all chocolate. In the same way, the more I have to admit that I am a “leaster,” the more I can share the many colors of God’s grace.

Just go through the commandments. Where has pride made me guilty of breaking the first commandment? God has forgiven me. Where have I misused God’s name or failed to pray to him when in trouble? God has forgiven me. Where have I had sinful sexual thoughts or actions? God has forgiven me. Where have I told lies and deceived people? God has forgiven me. There are so many “colors” to God’s forgiving love.

So also you, the more “leaster” you are, the more colors of God’s wisdom and grace you have to share. Isn’t that why testimonials are so powerful? A person shares their struggle and can say how God’s grace helped them through. Another person tells their story. And God’s grace becomes more colorful.

That’s one of the benefits of asking the very first question that Greg Finke suggests for missional small groups. How is God messing with you? How did you see God at work this week? You may have seen him at work in your own life or in the life of someone in your neighborhood. When you talk about that question, what are you doing except making known the manifold wisdom, the many-colored wisdom of God at work in you and in His mission field.

So relax! You aren’t good enough to be a missionary? Great! That just means you have more to share about God’s incredible saving wisdom!

And as you seek to get to know the people in your neighborhood, remember this is Jesus’ mission field, and you have a powerful ally in his mission. Paul wrote:

¹² In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Relax because you can pray boldly for the people in your neighborhood. That’s what Paul is about to do at the end of this chapter. We will do that in just a minute.

But there is one more thing as you think about Joining Jesus on His Mission—the mission often works best when you are at your weakest or at your worst. Paul ends this section by writing: *¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*

Paul’s suffering was a benefit for the Ephesians. So too, if you are in a place of weakness right now, if you are at your worst, this too is part of Jesus’ mission. I think of a friend who just went into the nursing home. No one wants to go there. This is the “worst.” But there will be more people who will have to take care of him, more people who would not otherwise have been part of his neighborhood, more lost causes who are part of the Mission Mystery. And even as his health fails, he is in a position to let the many colored grace and wisdom of God show in his life. Even in the nursing home, he is part of Jesus’ Mission Miracle.

So where are you? What neighborhoods are you in? What can you do to Join Jesus on His Mission? First of all, relax! It doesn't all depend on you. And then see people from a different perspective. They are all included in Jesus' desire to save the world. The very fact that you have interaction with them shows that they are part of Jesus' mission. So spend time to enjoy them. Get to know them and see how else Jesus is involved in their life. And then tell them about the Mission Miracle you have experienced.

Do you have someone in mind that is in your neighborhood? Let's close by joining Paul in his prayer for Jesus' mission field.

¹⁴ For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family^[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

My Next Steps to Join Jesus on His Mission

- **A Call to Mission:** Work through GroupWork, first as an individual, and then as part of a group. If you are not part of Life Group small group Bible study, mark your interest on the Connection Card.
- **A Call to See:** What is God doing in the lives of those around you? Be curious. Enjoy the people in your “neighborhood” and ask Jesus to open your eyes to see what He is doing in their lives.
- **A Call to Pray:** Pray Ephesians 3:14-21 each day this week for someone in your “neighborhood.”

GroupWork

1. Begin with praying Father Mychal Judge's prayer on the top of the message outline.
2. This message series is based on the book *Joining Jesus on His Mission* by Pastor Greg Finke. Read the following definitions from his book and comment about them.
 - a. "Missional Living" means joining Jesus on his mission to save and living each day as if it were a mission trip into our community. We are Neighborhood Missionaries.
 - b. "Missional Community" is a small group of neighborhood missionaries who gather regularly to support each other as we learn to join Jesus on his mission.
 - c. "Neighborhood" is any network of people to which we have regular access. Who is regularly within your reach? Who are the people who live near you work near you, play near you, etc?
 - d. "Neighboring" is any interaction that fosters friendship between neighbors. "Neighboring" puts us into a position to see what Jesus is already up to in the lives of people near us.
3. Finke suggests using five simple questions that correspond with five practices of missional living. The five practices are **bolded**. Work through these questions as a group. Don't get discouraged! We will talk about these questions in the next message. The purpose is for us to become familiar with the questions.
 - a. **Seeking the Kingdom:** How did you see God at work this week?
 - b. **Hearing from Jesus:** What has Jesus been teaching you in his Word?
 - c. **Talking with People:** What kind of conversations did you have with pre-Christians this past week? (By using "pre-Christians" Finke wants to err on the side of hope!)
 - d. **Doing Good:** What good can we do around here?
 - e. **Ministering through Prayer:** How can we help you through prayer?
4. Read together Dr. Martin Luther's explanation of the Address of the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven: What does this mean?

With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, so that we may pray to him as boldly and confidently as dear children ask their dear father.

Compare these words with Ephesians 3:12. Why is this confidence important to remember as we see ourselves as neighborhood missionaries?
5. Close by praying together Ephesians 3:14-21 with someone from your "neighborhood" in mind.