**Membership Sunday: The Church’s Mystery**

Ephesians 3:2-12

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The summer after grade 5 something happened that changed the trajectory of my life. I started reading the Hardy Boys novels. Well to be fair I started reading, which is what changed my life. But in Joe and Frank Hardy I initially found the reason why.

If you haven’t read them, in nearly every *Hardy Boys* book, teenage brothers Frank and Joe stumble onto a mystery—often involving a theft, a disappearance, or a secret criminal ring. And they use their wits, courage, and a bit of luck to solve it before the adults can get their act together. And I was hooked. I loved the excitement, I loved the surprise of thinking I had things figured out only to realize there was something I’d missed, and I loved the idea that kids could make a difference even if they weren’t old enough to vote. It was all part of the mystery.

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Well this morning we are in our membership Sunday which is something we do once a year here at Fort George. And this means we are taking a break from Exodus to focus on what it means to be part of Jesus’ church together. See while we enjoy singing and smiling at each other, this isn’t some kind of happy club, church is a thing Jesus invented to rout the gates of hell. And He is accomplishing this by re-storying a bunch of broken and imperfect people in who we are as the children of God. So, if you’ve got a Bible open it up to Ephesians 3. That’s where we’re going today.

Ephesians was a letter Paul wrote to encourage the young church in Ephesus to stand strong as the body of Christ in an incredibly secular and pagan society. So would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Ephesians 3:2-12]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

You probably noticed that there is a word that gets repeated more than any other in this passage, and it’s the word mystery. Paul says it is his job to proclaim a mystery. But when Paul talks about mystery it’s not the same as when the Hardy boys do it. See when Frank and Joe dig into a mystery it’s something unknown they try to figure out – that’s what mystery means in English.

But in Greek, and especially in Paul’s writing, a mystery is a truth or reality that is hidden and unknowable apart from God’s revelation. So it isn’t just something difficult to understand, it’s something that can never be fully grasped by human reason alone.

But in verses 3 to 5 Paul says God has now chosen to reveal this mystery in a way He had only hinted at throughout the Old Testament. And Paul says God has revealed it in such a way that we can see its truth too.

And there are two things about this mystery that I want to draw attention to on this Membership Sunday. First, this mystery is built on the wonder of grace, and second it shines out of the brilliance of the church.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let’s start with the foundation that this mystery is built on – the wonder of grace.

So across the New Testament “mystery” is used to describe what God does to save humanity, and it is often linked together with the word gospel. So for example in verse 6 Paul says:

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. (Ephesians 3:6)

Paul says God’s mystery is that in Jesus everyone – Jews and Gentiles – have been made members of one body together. And Paul calls this the gospel.

Now “gospel” wasn’t a word Paul made up, it was a common term in the first century. A gospel was a declaration of fact. It was news about something that had happened. So when an emperor would defeat the barbarian hoards who were attacking he would send out a runner to tell the gospel to his people – and the gospel was “you’re not going to die; the enemy has been defeated; you’ve been saved.” It was a message about something good that had happened.

Now there is nothing mysterious about gospel on it’s own; not until it becomes news about what Jesus has done. Then it’s something totally beyond human imagination.

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Now our world doesn’t like to think Jesus is different from any other religious leader. So when I used to be a chaplain up at UNBC there was a poster on the wall that was meant to show how all religion is the same. And it used the golden rule as the standard. So Jesus says “Do onto others as you would have them do onto you.”

And every religion says something like this. Like Hinduism says: Do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. And Buddhism says “Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” And Islam says, “Wish for others what you wish for yourself.”

And the basic idea is that if you run around stealing from people and stabbing them in the back, sooner or later things are going to go badly for you. But if you treat people nicely things usually turn out good. And there’s no mystery to this, it’s common sense.

And then every other religion builds on this common sense saying there is a good beyond the good we can experience daily that can be attained by being really good.

So Buddha taught that in order to be awakened into enlightenment you need to follow the Noble Eightfold path. You need to live ethically, and act wisely and meditate deeply. And if you do these things well enough even you can attain enlightenment.

In Islam Mohammad taught that to be saved you need to submit to the will of Allah. And you do this by performing the Five Pillars. Praying, giving, fasting, going on pilgrimage and professing your faith. And if you do these things well enough God will save you.

And every religion is like this except Christianity. Only in Jesus’ gospel do we get something different. See His gospel isn’t that if you follow the Golden Rule well enough then God will bless you and save you. His gospel is the news that God has done something you could never have done yourself. And it’s His action on your behalf that saves you. And this is a mystery.

See God loved the world so much that He came to earth in Jesus triumphing over evil. But He did this by laying His life down. He won, by losing. He gained everything by giving it all up. He overcame my sin and yours, and removed our guilt, by taking it on Himself. And by dying on the cross Jesus took what we deserve in order that we could get what He deserved. And He gives us all of this totally by grace – we don’t deserve it.

And this is so counterintuitive and so unimaginable that apart from God’s revelation no one would come up with it on their own. So in 1st Corinthians we read:

The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

Paul says, there’s a mystery to what God did for us. So until God reveals it to you the whole thing will seem like foolishness, but when He reveals it then we realize it’s the power of God and instead of foolishness the gospel brings everything else in life into focus.

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Here’s what this looks like in the natural realm: Imagine Sir Isaac Newton under that apple tree discovering gravity. As soon as the penny dropped it was like the whole world suddenly snapped into focus. The moon orbiting, the tides moving — things that once seemed unrelated suddenly fit together in one elegant truth. And this is what happens when God reveals His gospel to you. When you see the truth, the chaos doesn’t disappear, but you can finally see the power of God at work in the world. The gospel makes sense of the world in a way you never imagined before.

And this isn’t just an idea, it actually makes a difference in how we live. Like if you try to live your life being good in hopes that if there’s a God, He will accept you at first this seems to make sense. If you fail you just try harder. But as time goes on you either have to give up trying or stop thinking about it because no one can live up to even their own standards of goodness. Everyone hurts someone at some point and eventually everyone lets themselves down.

But if you live by the gospel – that you are saved by grace and accepted by God no matter how bad you are or what you are done – it doesn’t make sense. But as time goes on it becomes more and more wonderful. The mystery of grace turns us into the very kind of people we wanted to become before but were never able to be.

See some people think that if you are saved by grace it will result in you just being lazy and taking God for granted. But what actually happens when you taste Jesus’ grace is that you start wanting to live your life to His glory in a way you never even imagined possible before. When the gospel gets into you God doesn’t change what you do, He changes what you want to do.

So have you encountered the counterintuitive mystery of the gospel and been won by it? If you have then it’s fascinating to you and you are always hungry for more. Feed that hunger. This is the mystery of the gospel.

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But there’s a second part to this mystery that is intimately tied to the first. See encountering God’s salvation in Christ isn’t simply something that happens to us individually, the design is that we encounter it together. And so immediately after showing us the mystery of the gospel Paul shows us the brilliance of the church. Look at verse 7 and following. Paul says:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of His power…. to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known (Ephesians 3:7-10)

So Paul has already established how in Christ the Gentiles and the Jews have been made part of one body, and now he says that God’s intent is to reveal His manifold wisdom – or brilliant wisdom – through the church.

Now how does this work? Well, one of the basic truths of the world is that everything is breaking down. Like your coffee never magically gets hotter That’s thermodynamics. But we also see this at other levels. So think war or racism or crime. It’s all about the relationships of people who should be living together breaking apart. Or think disease and age. It’s all about your body which is supposed to work together breaking down.

But the Bible says this wasn’t the design. Back in Genesis when God created the world He created harmony and peace. But when sin entered the picture everything that was supposed to work together began coming apart. So if you’ve ever wondered, it’s because of sin that now the universe is slowly turning your perfect latte into lukewarm disappointment.

But scripture also says that one day Jesus is going to come back and put an end to this entropy. Imagine how awesome coffee is going to be in heaven! But maybe even better than that, one day He will eradicate death, disease and injustice and return peace to earth. That’s God’s ultimate plan.

But that’s not the only part of His plan. He’s got an “in the meantime” plan as well. And that plan isn’t just for me or you, it’s for us together. So Paul writes:

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known….In [Christ] and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. (Ephesians 3:10-12)

Now there are two amazing things to see here: first, the abundant life full of freedom and confidence available to us in Christ is primarily a “we” thing not a “me” thing. Faith isn’t primarily about me and Jesus. It’s about being part of His body together. And second, Paul says it’s the togetherness of Jesus’ body that reveals Christ to the world. This is the manifold wisdom, or brilliant wisdom of God.

So in the church in Ephesus there were Gentiles and Jews following Jesus together. And this was an incredibly radical thing. Gentiles and Jews had nothing in common. They never mixed. They came from totally different cultures. They were totally different races. They had totally different lifestyles. And yet they were together as church.

And Paul says this is what reveals the beauty of the mystery of the manifold wisdom of God. And it wasn’t just race. This kind of unity didn’t exist anywhere else in the world. In the first century there was no context where rich and poor and old and young and educated and uneducated people lived together in harmony. But this happened in the church. And as such the church became a picture of heaven to come.

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Now if you’ve been around church for a while you’ve probably found out that there are people here. And wherever there are two people in the same room the potential for hurt compounds. And I know for a fact that lots of us here have histories of pain that has been perpetrated by people who claim the name of Christ.

So how is church a picture of heaven? Well, first of all we need to see that the brokenness of church isn’t something new. In fact Ephesians and the other letters Paul writes are all written to churches who were experiencing all sorts of disfunction – read the letters. You’ll find that the church of the first century wasn’t some perfect place and then it deteriorated over time. In fact it was full of broken people right from the beginning. And yet Paul says this imperfect church is indispensable. So how?

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Well, there are two ways to look at this. The first is that the church is the place where we grow to look like Jesus. See Christian means little Christ. But what I think we miss sometimes is actually thinking about what Jesus looked like. I mean Jesus lived a life of humility proclaiming God’s kingdom and showing love and mercy to people, but He did this very deliberately in a context where people hated Him and eventually killed Him.

And yet somewhere along the line people got to thinking that if we take up our crosses and follow Jesus our life is going to be full of chocolate and hot coffee. But think about it, the mystery of the gospel is that we are saved by Jesus laying His life down. He won by losing. He gained everything by giving it all up. And He calls us to follow Him.

And it’s part of the mystery of the gospel that when we follow Him, even into suffering, we find the abundant life He wants for us. This is what happened to the disciples.

Like think about Peter in prison in Acts 12. He was all chained up and about to be executed the next day, and yet he was sleeping peacefully. How was he sleeping? It’s because the mystery of the gospel was at work in him and he had grown to look like Jesus. And the result was a life so abundant that he was at total peace even while he was about to die.

It was the same with Paul. In Acts 16 he and Silas were beaten and thrown in prison. But they weren’t bitter and discouraged that bad things had happened to them. They were singing for joy because their joy wasn’t tied to their circumstances, their joy was tied to the fact that the mystery of the gospel was alive in them. And as a result they had abundant life even while they were suffering. This is what Christians grow into.

And guess what, church is the training ground where we grow to look like Jesus. And so, while Jesus isn’t in favor of any of us hurting each other, He works all things out – including the reality that we are a bunch of broken people living together – for the good of those who love Him. And He knows that our good means growing to look like Him.

So think about it, how are you going to learn how to forgive if people are always speaking kindly to you and taking you out for lunch? You can’t learn to love your enemies in a context where everyone agrees with you. So even the brokenness of church plays into our growing to look like Jesus. And we have to learn it here before we take it to the world.

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A second way to look at this is to take a step back and think about how it is that you became the person you are today. It’s a lot of nature and nurture. Like I am who I am because of my family and my neighbours and the people who inspired me. And all these relationships have influenced me and all the circumstances I’ve lived through have shaped me. And some of this is good, and some of this is bad. My story explains a lot about the specific temptations I face and the selfish ways I default to treating the people around me.

Now think about how it is I’m going to change. It’s going to be the same way. So it’s not going to be me by myself. No, I need a new family and a new culture and a new community of support around me. And this is what the gospel creates: a new family and a new body that Jesus uses to shape me into His image.

And His plan isn’t just for my good, this miracle is God’s plan for the world. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says:

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden….In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

The “you’s” in this passage are all plural. It’s a town on a hill that can’t be hidden. Jesus says His design is that His followers together as church will be the brilliant light of the world. It’s as we grow in unity despite having different preferences and not agreeing about everything that we reflect His glory to our neighbours and our city and they will be drawn into the glory of God. Have you bought in to Jesus’ vision for what He’s doing here?

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So God saves us through the mystery of grace which is the gospel, and He calls us into living together as church which is where we grow in His image and join Him in His mission to save the world. So practically what does it mean to be part of the church of Fort George?

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Here is where I want to direct your attention towards the handout you received when you came in. If you didn’t get one put your hand up and we will get one to you. Or take out your phone and follow the QR code on the chair to Membership Application. In verse 6 Paul said “the mystery of the gospel is that in Christ all of us are members of one body together.” And so we want to encourage everyone who considers Fort George to be their church to take out membership here.

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Now I want to address three kinds of people in the room today. So some of you are members already. Great! If that’s you, then my encouragement would be to fill this in again as a way of saying “I’m still committed to growing in Christ at FGBC.” This isn’t mandatory, but it’s a good practice. Like reminding ourselves that we are committed to following God is something Jesus followers do. We don’t just attend church once and we’re good. We don’t just take communion once and we’re good. Jesus followers remind ourselves over and over again that we are following Jesus. So if you’re a member my encouragement is for you to fill this out again.

A second kind of person who is here today is visiting or checking us out. If this is you don’t feel the need to apply. Membership is for people who consider Fort George to be their church. So ask yourself “Is this my church?” If it is, then membership is for you whether you’ve been here two Sundays or 20 years.

Now connected to this, if you find yourself here from another church, I want to encourage you to let that community know why you left – have a conversation – not in anger, but out of love, wanting the best for them. If you were hurt let them know and give them the opportunity to apologize. And give yourself an opportunity to grow to look like Jesus – forgive them, don’t hold a grudge.

Now if this is you there is probably a grey zone where you are considering whether in fact you are leaving one church to go somewhere else. We respect that. You are welcome here while you decide.

But if you realize you’ve passed that grey zone and Fort George is your church, then it’s time to become a member. Don’t put your faith on hold. Commit yourself to growing in Christlikeness with us. Being members of His body is God’s design for His children.

Finally, some of you are only planning to be here a short while. Maybe you are a student or you’ve got a temporary job. If this is you, and you plan to be at Fort George one year from now, then I want to encourage you to commit yourself to membership while you are here. You can always change it when you move, but don’t put your faith on hold while you are here. Be present. Become part of the body and grow to look like Jesus with us.

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Alright, from all those three places I want to end by walking through the Fort George Membership Covenant Application so please pull yours out:

1. Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/a-foretaste-of-the-future/> Accessed October 17, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)