

Together
Ephesians 3:1-13
Summer Road Trip Week 6
July 16, 2017

Welcome/intro/vision

We're in the last couple of weeks of our Summer Road Trip series, if you're new let me get you up to speed:

it's summer time and for many of us that means getting away for some rest and vacation which is a great thing

But many of us can attest to going on vacation with an unrealistic expectation of the problems it would solve.

Most of us have gone away on vacation and been glad to get away from the problems back home only to return from vacation and find those problems still waiting for us.

There are things that vacation cannot fix!

So we're for the first half of the summer we're taking a road trip through the first 3 chapters of the New Testament book of Ephesians

to help us to get answers to these deeper questions, to meet some of these hungers that are too deep and too big for a summer vacation to meet

We're going to wrap up this series next Sunday morning but wanted to encourage you to join us next Sunday night as we do our Scripture dig-in

we're going to finish off the last 3 chapters of Ephesians and at the same time learn how to read the Scriptures for ourselves, so join us for that at the Chatham Mills ministry space, details are in your bulletin

Last week we talked about this longing most of us have for belonging

And we saw that when God sets out to create a sense of belonging, what God does is the exact opposite of what so many of us do: God generates belonging not by building walls but by knocking those walls down

Especially the walls that tend to divide people along nationality and ethnicity and what we typically today call race

This idea was so revolutionary and so difficult for his first century audience to understand, that Paul is going to have to continue to unpack it in this next section of the letter that we're going to look at this morning

And the key word that Paul's going to use in the passage today is this word "together"

Now you don't have to be a parent to have seen or experienced that getting kids to play nicely together does not come naturally for most of them

All the important rules that make playing together nicely possible have to be taught: sharing has to be taught, taking your turn has to be taught

And even when they KNOW the rules, kids just like adults sometimes have a hard time playing consistently by those rules

We found an old family video from Christmas many years ago when our kids were at the grandparents opening presents and one of my kids says to the other one in a little sweet toddler voice:

"I open my presents right now, YOU open YOUR presents at home!"

And then in a sweet shift 30 seconds later, that same kid says to that same sibling, "You go first this time" as they're taking turns opening the presents—and it melts my heart every time!

The struggle is real! We live in a world where resources like time, energy, affection, attention, importance and significance are all limited or feel like they're limited

And when we are afraid that we're not going to get what we need, what do we do? We go into survival mode and we hoard resources—and this whole idea of together can be a harder sell

And so some of us abandon it altogether—or at least abandon it in theory. Because as hard as doing life together is with all the sacrifices and frustrations and challenges

it turns out that we can't actually live a full life apart from other people. There is no human flourishing in isolation, ***there is no human flourishing without together.***

And it also turns out as we read through the Bible that there is no way to be a part of what God's doing in the world without together.

Together, as it turns out, is pretty essential for us individually and for any of us who want to be fully alive AND any of us who want anything to do with God

At our summer road trip tour stop today, Paul is going to lean into this idea of together and he's going to tell us both ***the power that makes it possible for us to really DO together***, to help us to navigate all the landmines that come with community

But Paul is also going to tell ***us God's ultimate purpose for together***

And as we're going to see in this passage, God's goal with together is not just warm-fuzzies, we're not going to have a holding hands and swaying moment and I don't have a guy in the back in a Barney costume who's going to come out in a moment and start singing

The togetherness that God wants to create in the church is an emphatic almost-military-like statement to all the forces that are set against God and God's image-bearers--human beings like you and me that he loves

Together, as it turns out, has eternal, significant, spiritual ramifications not just for us but for the entire cosmos

That's what we discover as we open up to Ephesians 3:1 today—Bible/no Bible/book table

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles

Now this was important because Paul is in jail as he's writing this, which his detractors delighted in and could be used to discredit him

And remember that this letter was intended to circulate to churches throughout the surrounding cities and many of those folks had never met Paul

So as you read through Paul's letters in the New Testament, he's regularly referencing his imprisonment and trying to leverage it as a credit rather than a strike against him—"I'm in here for you" Paul says

And then comes this abrupt shift, like a letter written in a hurry, as Paul jumps to this further explanation of his work and his ministry, what he's about and why:

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.

A couple of weeks ago we had a baptism service here and a woman who was being baptized, Anne, shared a very brief overview her story of coming to faith in remarkable and dramatic ways just in the past few months—

from someone who never would have ever dreamed she'd be in a Christian church to getting baptized with us here in really just the span of a handful of dramatic, crazy weeks.

I've had the privilege of being her neighbor and sharing some parts of her journey, it's been amazing

And one of the things she shared as she told her story was that she has this sense that Jesus has met her in amazing ways not just for herself, but because Jesus has work for her to do

And just a couple of weeks into her walk with Jesus, she's got this wonderful, wonderful open posture: "God, you've showed me your grace not just for me--what do you want me to do? I'm open to anything."

Paul here is talking about his own experience of God's grace that overflows into his mission

In God's grace, God has poured out grace on Paul and given him an administration of grace, a work of grace, a ministry to do—given to Paul FOR THEM, the Gentiles

I want to suggest to all of us that we are here in church on this Sunday morning to receive God's grace and mercy and to orient our lives around Christ's life, death and resurrection

And we do so in order that we might be a gift to someone else. You are here not just for you but in order that you might leave here and bless someone else

According to the Scriptures, when we were first created one of our most important jobs was that ***we were created to help each other to flourish in the power of God's generous love***

To help each other to flourish: that starts today, right here, as we gather together in community

We gather to point one another towards God in every season of our lives, no matter what's going on in your life at home at work, whether things are great or horrible, we are here to remind each other of God's great love and that we together might love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, souls, mind, and strength

But we're also sent out of here to go and do that with everyone we meet this week---each week we are sent from this place to go and be an instrument of flourishing to everyone we interact with:

to encourage, to teach, to laugh, to love, go to work, to disagree with civility and kindness and graciousness

To live out a life of faith, hope, and love in every single relationship in spite of what everyone around us is doing, to share our faith in winsome and generous hearted and inviting ways

To start businesses and companies and non-profits that provide people with meaningful work and a good living and that do good in our communities, provide important goods and services that make a difference in people's lives

To undertake hobbies that bring out the best in people, that push us and help us to continue to grow

What if you woke up tomorrow morning and the first thing you prayed before you got up out of bed was this:

"God, you have given me this day so that I might help someone else come more alive in the power of your generous love."

And then you went about your day totally expectant that there were going to be opportunities all throughout your day to help someone or maybe multiple someones around you to flourish?

You and I are here today, this morning, be filled with grace and then be instruments of grace wherever God might lead you and prompt you and has positioned you to do so

Because we were created to help each other to flourish

Notice here in this part of the passage, several times Paul uses this word "***mystery***" a couple of times and he'll do so again later in this same passage.

Mystery religions were huge in the ancient world, especially in the ancient Roman world.

Everyone was looking for the secrets to connecting with the gods, looking for secret wisdom and knowledge that would unlock all the mysteries of the universe

And there were all these gurus and teachers and movements that said if you followed their secret ways you would unlock the secrets of cosmos

And sometimes these secrets were available for a fee, sometimes available if you committed to following their secret ways or joining their secret society

So Paul here uses mystery language because it resonates with the broader culture, but he does so with a bit of irony, because this is the open secret

And he's about to give away this mystery and this secret to anyone and everyone who's reading this letter—FOR FREE!

Paul is writing to people who are surrounded by mystery religions and he's riffing off of that cultural movement to build a bridge to something much deeper, here's the mystery he wants to unveil

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.

This past week in the Connect Devotional, Steve talked about this as a major cliff-hanger let-down. This is the big mystery? Please! We need something a little more juicy than this!

But like we talked about last week, in Paul's day, this was huge. In fact, racial issues were the single biggest problem that the first church dealt with.

Almost every letter of the New Testament is written to deal with problems or challenges in the churches they're writing to

And almost every single letter is written in part to deal with the problems that came about as Jews and Gentiles were trying to work this following Jesus thing out TOGETHER

And this word 'together' gets repeated: ***heirs together, members together, sharers together***

We talked earlier about this tension that we live in:

together is hard because even the people that we like and trust the most let us down and are occasionally disasters or at least rub us the wrong way

but at the same time together is essential, there is no flourishing, real flourishing, apart from living out this together

So what's the thing that God has done to make this new togetherness possible? ***Through the gospel***

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus finally makes together possible in a way that wasn't possible before

Have you ever tried to do TOGETHER without the cross? Ever seen other people attempt to do TOGETHER without Jesus—happens all the time! Work places, causes, efforts.

Question: How fragile is together apart from the gospel? VERY!

And some of those partnerships and groups do manage to last for a while, that's a great thing!

But ultimately the whole of human history can be summed up in our failure to sustain the together that is essential for ongoing, long-term, sustained human flourishing.

People sin against us, it happens all the time. Sin is broken relationship and it undermines this whole togetherness thing all the time

Where does the power come to forgive someone who sins against us that you don't want to forgive? The gospel: The cross of Christ, the empty tomb of Christ, the blood of Christ, that's the power of forgiveness that fuels together

It's not just other people who sin, right? I sin against people. I've said and done stuff I'm not proud of and that's done damage to the possibility of this whole 'together' thing

And sometimes guilt or shame can keep me from wanting to enter into this whole together thing

Where does the power come to wash away my own guilt and shame so that I might be able to enter freely and fully into the power of together?

The gospel: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ washes all my guilt and shame away

Or sometimes, and this is even worse, I refuse to acknowledge something I did, my stupid pride won't let me admit my own dumb mistakes

Pride will always ruin together

Where does the power come that frees me from my stupid pride?

Where does the power come that frees me to acknowledge when I made a mistake, that frees me from clinging to my own illusions about how great I am and that frees me to willingly acknowledge when I drop the ball?

The gospel has that power. The good news of Jesus's life, death and resurrection for my forgiveness of my sins demands that I come to terms with the reality that I'm not as perfect as I would like to think that I am

Many people reject the sacrifice of Jesus based on an exaggerated estimation of our own moral goodness. This exaggerated estimation of our own moral goodness not only keeps us from receiving grace where we need to receive grace

It also keeps us from being able to enter into the together that God designed us for, because pride will always ruin together—your pride and mine

The gospel is the power for this together.

Back in February, we spent several weeks talking about what kind of church we wanted to be, and the scripture we used was from Ezekiel

During a long stretch where God's people were in exile, God gives them this wonderful promise in Ezekiel 17

"...I myself will plant it... that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest."

And we talked about what it would take for us to be this kind of a church—a noble cedar church where all the birds of the air might take their rest and make their nest in us

Cynics and seekers and believers and men and women and people who are new to town and people who have been here for generations

and teens and retirees and every race and ethnicity and class

Democrats AND Republicans in the same church, people who disagree on some theological issues all in the same community

Do you know what this is a recipe for in our highly charged, politicized culture? It's a recipe for disaster! It's a recipe for conflict and explosions and a forest fire!

We will become a char-grilled cedar instead of a noble cedar ***UNLESS there's something*** bigger than any of us at the center of it all to hold it together, to fuel it with grace and love that is more than any of us could generate on our own

This tree is poised for a total collapse apart from the gospel at the center of it all. The cross at the center of it all. Jesus at the center of it all

Because this kind of together requires a God-sized dose of humility and sacrifice, grace and forgiveness and confession and repentance all in order to experience the joy of it.

It's way easier to be in a community where everyone votes like you do, is in the same socio-economic bracket, does the same kind of work, is all your same age-group, or where everyone agrees with you on various biblical interpretations and issues that we get passionate about

This tree is every secular liberal's dream, but they refuse to acknowledge the gospel is the only power that can make it possible for the long-term

And so they continue in their well-intentioned attempts at together that are innately incredibly fragile

because there is no cross that reminds us that we're forgiven sinners, no cross to call us to confess our sins of pride or anger or lust or ambition, no cross that commands us to forgive one another as Jesus said even 70x7 times

Meanwhile, this tree is eyed with suspicion by conservatives who suspect this is all some politically correct agenda

but we declare boldly that this was Jesus's agenda and the Scriptures agenda long before it got used for any political agenda and we will not stop pressing towards it

This is the Jesus way—neither liberal nor conservative

but holy and whole, full of grace and truth that stretches every one of us and that calls us to follow Jesus in ways that are both life-giving and at the same time call us to die to ourselves as we walk in it

[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.]

The mystery is that this whole together thing which we have a push-pull with but is essential for ongoing, long-term human flourishing

is now finally possible through the gospel, through the power of the cross, through Jesus

Now I don't know about you, but for me, when I'm learning something new or trying to make sense of something, it helps for me to understand the goal or the purpose

Paul knows this and so a few verse down, as he's continuing to unpack the work that God has done to bring people together across racial lines

He makes this turn to explain what God's goal was—what's God's purpose, why has God gone about to doing this? Verse 10:

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.

Many, many moons ago, Steve Jobs co-founded Apple. Eventually he was fired. And then 12 years later he was brought back to try to save Apple from the brink of bankruptcy.

And the incredible, unparalleled run of success that Apple had from when he came back in 1997 to when he died in 2011, was proof of his manifold wisdom to all of the watching technology geeks everywhere

Many, many moons ago, Michael Jordan did not make the cut for his high school basketball team

He went home and cried. And then he started working out like a man obsessed. He says that whenever he got tired and wanted to quit working out, he'd close his eyes and remember the roster list without his name on it

And throughout a majestic basketball career through the rest of high school, at a little school down the road that I happen to know and love, and then on into the NBA until he finally retired in 2003

Michael Jordan demonstrated and displayed his greatness to millions and millions of fans, including and especially his high school basketball coach who has never lived it down that he's the one who didn't give Michael Jordan a spot on the roster

God created and intended for human beings to help one another flourish by being agents of his great love to one another

That intent was hijacked by other spiritual forces that human beings have embraced rather than the good and perfect God

And so now, our efforts at together are fragile and they consistently and constantly break down, leaving some of us running as far away from other people as we can and trying to resist a healthy network of relationships

While others of us keep picking up the pieces and trying, trying, trying again

But now God has acted in Jesus to reclaim what was his to begin with, kind of like Steve Jobs coming back to Apple

And he has labored and labored and labored to do what had to be done to become the greatest figure in history in Jesus Christ's life and death on the cross, kind of like what Jordan did to become the greatest figure in professional basketball

Only while Steve Jobs has the iPhone for his legacy and while Michael Jordan has a ton of awards and records and stats many of whom will likely never be broken or equaled

God's great trophy and demonstration of his wisdom and his power is what? **The church! The church is supposed to be demonstrating God's wisdom and wonder and power!** What was God thinking!?!?!

Who in their right mind would commit their eternal legacy to something as fragile and broken and messy as the church, full of stubborn and proud and fickle and distracted people like me!?!?

And that's not all—who is God demonstrating his wisdom and his victory to? Who's the one watching all this happen? **The rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms**

This is bible language for all the spiritual forces around us

the angelic forces of God as well as those spiritual forces of evil that had inserted themselves into the world and introduced the cancer and the toxin of division, pride, and sin

The unity of the church across racial lines is going to be THE DEMONSTRATION to the forces of evil that had hijacked God's good creation

that the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise God was back in charge and doing something wonderful and redemptive that healing and life-giving

Human beings were going to flourish AGAIN, as they were designed to flourish, because together is now possible especially across racial lines, because of the power of the gospel

And whenever and however this actually happens, whenever the church actually lives out God's TOGETHERNESS through the power of the gospel

God shines a ginormous eternal spotlight on it and says "See! There it is! My power and my wisdom are being demonstrated right there!"

God demonstrating his wisdom through the broken and messy church is kind of like making it in New York. If he can make it there, he can make it anywhere

If God can take something as broken and messy as you and me and make us into a demonstration of his power and might, his wisdom and goodness, then he is an all mighty, wise, and all-powerful God indeed.

Today's TAKE-WITH's:

- 1. Tomorrow morning's first-thing prayer: "God, you have given me this day so that I might help someone come more alive in the power of your generous love."**

To start with, we have to know this generous love for ourselves. But you're here, we're singing about it, the Scriptures we're looking at proclaim it to us

And we're here together reminding each other of it, helping each other to understand and enter into it together

And so you've received it, even if this is your first time ever in a church setting, you've been given a gift of a small slice of God's infinitely generous love

And that gift IS for you, merry Christmas in July, but it's not just for you

So tomorrow morning, what if you made this your prayer, to take up a big part of the original job description of human beings, to help one another to flourish and come more alive

- 2. How might the gospel free you to enter more fully into God's vision for together?**

God's goal for all humanity is a reconciled humanity—with himself and with each other. God is so committed to this that he sent his Son to die on a cross

That cross is the power for together—it forgives us our sins which frees us to acknowledge our sins and it is the power to extend forgiveness to one another

The gospel is the rock solid power for TOGETHER in a world whose whole history could be described ultimately as the failure of our ability to maintain the TOGETHER necessary for humans to flourish consistently and always

That power of together is now possible through the gospel.

Where do you need to work that out, where do you need to embrace it, where do you need **to receive grace and forgiveness** so that you don't bring shame and guilt into your relationships?

Where do you need to look at the cross and say, "That had to happen for me. I need forgiveness. I'm not shocked that other people are saying that my pride or selfishness or thoughtlessness or my racial prejudice is a problem.

Jesus has already told me that on the cross. I'm free **to acknowledge my faults and flaws**, receive grace and mercy, and ask forgiveness from others as I ask the Spirit of Christ to bring change to my character that I desperately need.

And lastly, where does the gospel empower you **to extend forgiveness** to others who have sinned against you? How might you take the power of the cross and ask Jesus to bring it to bear that you might forgive someone else who has harmed you?

My friends, there is no flourishing without some measure of together. The good news is that the together we were made for, across every line and every barrier, has been fought for and won by Jesus

And as we enter into that together in the power of the gospel, God shines his eternal spotlight onto it and points to it and says, "Look and see! Here are my beloved children, coming alive as I designed for them to!"

May it be so with each of us individually and with us as a church!

Pray

PBO: Stand and sing

Woods: Offering transition

Benediction at Woods:

Chairs

Guests: Come and see me