



Sermon Transcript

June 7, 2020

God's One Story of Redemption

A Timely Message on Race

Ephesians 3:1-21

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 7, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Ephesians 3:1-21

¹ For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—
² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³ So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who is able to far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Introduction

The title of my sermon is “A Timely Message on Race.”

On one hand, I recognize that I’m stating the obvious when I say that this is a “timely” message. The murder of George Floyd by four Minneapolis police officers has put the issue of racial injustice right in front of our collective face. It is there for all to see. It is uncomfortable to look at. It is painful to process. Many are saying that they think this incident could be a “tipping point” in our country to producing social change in matters of racial injustice. I hope so. But change won’t come without struggle and we—a predominantly white church—need to be part of that struggle. This sermon is just one step of a very long walk we need to take. This is a “timely message on race.”

At the same time, it is also a “timely” message because of where we find ourselves in our journey through the Bible. We are in the last month of a six-month journey through the story of the Bible. We have been using the acronym CASKET EMPTY to put together the story of the Bible. The word EMPTY helps us put together the flow of the New Testament. We continue this morning with the letter “T” which stands for TEACHING. This is a rather large section of the New Testament. We saw last week that 21 of the 27 books of the New Testament fall under this category of TEACHING.

We are going to discover that the TEACHING we find in our passage this morning is basically the Cliff notes of the entire story of the Bible. In Ephesians Paul alludes to the *eternal purpose that he [God] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord*. When you take the whole story of the Bible and put it together—as we are doing—you discover that the eternal purpose of God in Christ is to form a new humanity that is reconciled to God and united with one another. This puts the issue of race at the center of the gospel. This puts the issue of race at the core of what it means to be the church—the people of God. Listen to the racial overtones of what Paul says in Ephesians 2:14-16. *“For he himself [Jesus] is our peace, who has made us [Jew and Gentile] both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.”* These verses make you want to pray that Jesus would be lifted up among us so that the dividing walls of hostility that plague our country and often reside in our churches would come tumbling down. This is a “timely message on race” because this is where we were supposed to be this Sunday according to the schedule we drew up over six months ago. I see the gracious hand of God in that. Now may God grant us ears to listen.

This morning we are going to be in Ephesians 3 and before we look at the reasons why we should concern ourselves with the issue of race, I want you to see the example Paul sets for us in this passage. He begins this chapter by saying in verse 1, *“For this reason, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.”* Paul, a Jew, is in prison because he stood up for “the other.” He advocated for the Gentile. He calls himself *a prisoner of Christ Jesus*. And yet, the actual physical prison he is enduring is in the city of Rome. Physically, he is a prisoner of Rome. But it is because of his faith in Jesus that he took up the cause of the Gentile. His faith in Jesus left him no other option. He is in prison because he felt that the matter of race was so central to the gospel that it caused him to take up the cause of the one who was marginalized. He is in prison *on behalf* of the Gentiles.

It is a fascinating story of how Paul ended up in this prison. After completing three missionary journeys that saw many Gentiles come to faith in Christ, he returned to Jerusalem. His reputation preceded him as one who brought the gospel to the Gentiles and as one who fully embraced and “hung out” with them. And so the church leaders in Jerusalem knew that his very presence in Jerusalem would cause a stir among the Jews and so they encouraged Paul to go the temple to perform a vow so that he might temper some of the misconceptions that the Jews had formed about Paul. Don’t you find that when it comes to matters of race, often we are forming our opinion based on misconception? Can I encourage you to be very judicious in what you post on Facebook about the issue of race. I think Facebook posts often fuel misconceptions and they deepen the divide on issues like this. Before you post something just run it through the litmus test that Paul give us in Philippians 4:8—Is it true, honorable, just, pure, lovely and commendable? Nonetheless, without the presence of Facebook, Paul was the victim of misconception the was fueled by the rumor and gossip mill.

As good intentioned as Paul may have been, as soon as some Jews visiting the temple from parts of Asia saw Paul, they identified him as one who was opposed to the Jews. Pointing at Paul they cried out in Acts 21:28, *“Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place.”* Then they falsely accused him of bringing Gentiles into the part of the temple reserved only for Jews and the next thing you know an unruly mob was formed and it quickly turned ugly as they sought to kill Paul. Once the Roman officials stepped in to regain order, Paul asked to speak to his fellow Jews in his defense. He told them his story of how he went from persecuting the church to encountering Jesus on the road to Damascus. They listened intently to

him tell his story. But the moment he mentioned the Gentiles and that he was sent to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles—the mere mention of the word—the crowd became agitated. In Acts 22:22 it says, “*Up to this word [Gentile] they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’*” Wow! That is overt racial prejudice.

In Ephesians 3:1 Paul simply says, “this is why I am here.” Paul stood up for the Gentile in the presence of his own brothers—his own people. Why? Why did the Gentiles matter so much to Paul? I would like to highlight four reasons why the Gentiles mattered to Paul and why the issue of race needs to matter to us.

Race Matters: Because of Who We Are

Paul begins Ephesians 3 with the phrase “*For this reason.*” There was a reason why Paul was willing to be put in prison *on behalf of you Gentiles*. This phrase “*for this reason*” connects us to what Paul had just said in Ephesians 2:11-22. It is a wonderful passage that describes how God, through Jesus and the cross, has taken the Jew and the Gentile and has made them one. So let me just state the reason why the Gentiles mattered to Paul and why the issue of race should matter to us. It is because of who we are. Through the cross of Jesus, God has made us one. Therefore, in the gospel and at the foot of the cross, there is no room for racial division and prejudice.

There are two images that emerge out of Ephesians 2:11-22 that I want to highlight for us this morning. First of all, Paul says in verse 15 that the work of Christ has created *one new man in the place of two, so making peace*. When Paul talks about the *new man* in this passage, he is not talking about us as individuals. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul highlights the individual when he testifies “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.*” So we don’t downplay or deny the individual work God does in our lives. But that is not the focus of Ephesians 2. Here the focus is corporate. Here the focus is “the church.” Here the *one new man* is the diverse body of Christ—Jew and Gentile—white and black. God has *reconciled us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility*. And so Paul is saying to the “other” . . . to the Gentile that the reason he is in prison is because he no longer sees them as the “other” but rather as his “brother” and as his “sister.” After all, they are now *fellow citizens . . . members of the [same] household*.

The other image that Paul uses to illustrate who we are now that we have been reconciled to God through the cross of Jesus is that we are *a holy temple*. The trigger

that put Paul in prison was the false allegation that he brought Gentiles into the restricted area of the temple. And now he says to the Jew and the Gentile that through Jesus, not only do we all have access to God, but we are the temple. It is the place where God resides. The church is the manifest presence of God to the world. Through our unity and oneness in Christ we are showing God to the world. So I ask you, “what are we showing them?” Paul says that the church is *the dwelling place for God by the Spirit*. The testimony of God and of Jesus to the world is on display through our oneness.

One of the books that has really helped me process through this issue of race is a book called *Divided By Faith*. The title alone is hard to swallow and it tells us that we have some work to do to reflect the ideal Paul is holding up for us in Ephesians 2. On one hand, we can read through Ephesians 2:11-22 and theologically embrace the message of being reconciled to God and to each other through Jesus. But practically, that is not our experience. I was set back on my heels when I read in this book that the evangelical movement is 90% white. How that is measured, I am not sure, but I can only imagine the divide growing as the term “evangelical” has moved from being a “gospel” word to a political voting block. I heard a quote this week that asks “How do I know I have made an idol out of my politics? When you see the issue on racism as a battle of the left versus the right, INSTEAD of the kingdom of God verse the kingdom of darkness.” Ephesians 2 reminds us that this is a gospel issue at it’s core.

What I discovered through the book *Divided by Faith* is the reason why the evangelical movement can actually contribute to the divide is because of our high value on individual responsibility. In fact, rightly so, we all need to individually respond to the call of the gospel. But when it comes to matters of race, our high value for individual responsibility and the need to be accountable for the decisions we make fails to see the structural disadvantages people of color have at their disposal. The technical term for this is *racialization*. “A racialized society is a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships.”¹ And so George Yancey says that in order for us to contribute to racial reconciliation we need to move beyond the first step of building relationships to the second step of “recognizing social structures of inequality and that as Christians we resist them together.”²

That is the presenting issue before us. There is something fundamentally broken in our system that causes the African American to see the police as a threat. I know that is not the feeling of many who wear the badge and put their lives on the line to protect us. I know this image grieves many police officers who find themselves in a difficult and stressful situation. But I can’t imagine what it would be like for me to see my son—let

me put a face to it—to see my son Nate—to see my son Sam—to see my son-in-law Scott—pleading for his life with a knee held to his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds from someone who was there to protect him. For whatever reason, it is an all too common experience for the African American male—something I would find highly uncommon for me, a white male. This is a time for us to listen. This is a time for us to try to understand. This is a time for us to be slow to speak. Why? Because in Jesus the dividing wall of hostility has come down and the “other” is now by “brother.”

Race Matters: Because of our Calling

The second reason why the issue of race matters is because that is at the heart of our calling as a church. As we move into Ephesians 3 and hear Paul give further reason why he is in chains on behalf of the Gentiles he reveals that this is simply his calling. He is in prison as a result of being faithful to what God called him to do.

In verse 2, Paul refers to the “*stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you.*” He picks up this theme again in verse 7 where he says, “*Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by the working of his power.*” Often when we see the word *grace* we are conditioned to think about saving grace—Amazing grace—where through faith God gives himself fully to us in Christ by his Spirit. We think of verses like Ephesians 2:8-9, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And it is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” But here, Paul is using the word *grace* to describe the calling God has placed on his life. He has been called to be a *minister*—an apostle to the Gentiles. And so he is a *steward* of this grace. He is accountable to the assignment God has give him. He is in prison because he is faithful to the calling of God on his life. He answers to God and so he takes a stand for the “other.”

Notice how he describes the *grace* he has been given and what he has been called to. He uses the word *mystery* to describe the nature of his calling. When Paul uses the word *mystery* he is not talking about something that is “mysterious” or a secret of puzzling, like a mystery novel. Rather, the word *mystery* refers to a truth that we could not discover on our own but could be revealed to us by God. It is something that was hidden in the past but is now made plain and clear. And so there is nothing puzzling or “mysterious” about it once it is revealed.

So what has God made plain to us through the coming of Jesus? He defines this revelation in verse 6, “*This is mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of*

the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This verse is an example of how translating a verse from Greek to English misses something in the translation. In this verse there are three words in Greek that begin with the prefix *syn* which means “together with.” The English equivalent would be the prefix “co-.” The Jew and the Gentile are now *co-heirs . . . co-members of the same body . . . co-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus.*

Paul was called by God to give attention to the amazing thing that God has done. In fact, Paul says something rather profound in verse 10. It is as if Paul is asking the question our culture is asking, “how in the world can we heal these deep racial wounds?” Paul says that the answer is . . . the church. In fact he says that it is the church that makes known the manifold wisdom of God. I was in a prayer group this week with a group of pastors and between the pandemic and this racially charged moment, we are all feeling it. And one pastor cried out with a measure of despair, “God, I am tired of the devil getting all the headlines. I want you to get the headlines. I want you to be noticed and seen throughout the world.” After reflecting on that prayer and looking at this passage, I can’t help but wonder if we are the ones getting in the way of God getting the headlines. Paul says that if you want God to be seen and if you want the wisdom of God to be on display then let the church be the church—commit yourself to *stewarding the grace* God has given us—the call to be one.

Paul says to this issue of race, the wisdom of God is the answer to this problem and the key to solving it is removing the lens of “us versus them” and replacing it with the prefix of *co—co-heirs—co-members and co-partakers.* And just like Paul, we are stewards of that grace and the more we press in on this and grow in this the more the wonder of the wisdom of God is on display to the seen and the unseen world. This is our calling!

Race Matters: Because of Love

The third reason we should give ourselves to the matter of race is because of the love of Christ that lives inside of us. For the second time in our passage we find Paul using the phrase “*for this reason.*” He begins verse 14 with this statement, “*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom EVERY FAMILY in heaven and earth is named.*” Paul wants God to get the headlines that come as a result of a church that demonstrates to the world that the only way we can solve this racial divide is through the love of Christ. But knowing that there is a long way to go and that it is not an easy journey, Paul does what we need to do—*for this reason*—he bows his knees and prays to God the Father from whom *EVERY FAMILY in heaven and earth is named.*

But notice the focus of his prayer. At the end over verse 17 he prays that we would be *rooted and grounded in love*. It strikes me that I can't really experience and know that love all by myself. We were designed to live out our faith in the context of the church. I need others in order to know and experience Christ's love. The church is the body of Christ. That is more than just a metaphor. Our union with God and Christ is made known in our union with one another. And so he prays that in this love we *may have strength to comprehend WITH ALL THE SAINTS what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*.

Do you want to experience *the fullness of God*? We experience the fullness of God in the company of the saints—the diverse people of God—joined and held together by Christ. And so out of love, I want to make the effort to know and to understand what my black brother and sister have experienced growing up black in this country. When you take the time to do this it changes your perspective because there is now a face to put to this issue and the same story is repeated over and over again. I want to know ways in which the church, perhaps unwittingly, further reinforces this narrative. Why? Because God has placed within our hearts a love for the “other.” And I know that love is not always natural and native to our hearts . . . and so Paul turns to prayer that it may be so. He wants it to be so because he wants the wisdom of God to be on display—he wants God to grab the headlines.

Let love be the dominant force as you engage this issue. Let the love of Christ be at the center of your concern over this issue. Paul says that *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”* It is because of love of Christ that we enter into this conversation.

Race Matters: Because of What God Can Do

Our passage ends with two verses that we love to quote. They are verses filled with hope. *“Now to him who is able to far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”* It is especially encouraging to read these verses in light of the context of Ephesians 3. In the context of acknowledging that it is the eternal purpose of God in Christ to unite Jew and Gentile into one body and recognizing the deep wounds that often accompany

the issue of race; with great hope, Paul expresses the confidence that God can do more than we can even imagine in this matter. It may seem bleak and the problem may seem too big. It is painful enough for me to think about this issue on a personal level and to make personal strides in addressing my own shortcomings and sins of racism. But then to try to weed through the history of racial injustice and the systemic structures that continue to prop up racial injustice in our culture is often too much for me to even begin to comprehend. When I enter these conversations I confess that I am tempted to respond with a dismissive “yeah, but!” Can things change? And then Paul comes along with a reminder that we have one who *can do abundantly more than all that we ask or think*.

We just have to be willing to engage. We can't be passive and we can't be silent. But we being to engage so that we can see God do something in our time that we would have never imagined could happen. I am inviting you to engage.

Starting in July I am going to be preaching through the book of Micah. The most famous verse of Micah is Micah 6:8, *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”* I also want to host a book club around this topic and have some people come and share their stories. I want to explore ways we can build relationships and understand how we can be a people of healing.

Conclusion

This was a timely message for me. I trust it was for you. It is alright if you feel uncomfortable. To be honest, I feel uncomfortable. In some sense, we should all feel uncomfortable. But with humility and courage, we need to move forward and engage in this issue because this is what the gospel leads us to. In some sense, it is at the core of the whole story CASKET EMPTY. This is eternal purpose of God.

C—CREATION—fallen humanity finds hope in the promise of God
A—ABRAHAM—chosen to bring God's blessing to the nations
S—SINAI—God forms a people to reach the peoples of this world
K—KINGS—a descendant of David will bring justice to this broken world
E—EXILE—God does not forget the promise he made to his people
T—TEMPLE—God will once again dwell among his people

E—EXPECTATION—Someday the kingdom of God will fill the earth
M—MESSIAH—The kingdom of God is at hand in Christ and the cross
P—PENTECOST—The kingdom of God goes viral and spreads to the nations
T—TEACHING—**The eternal purpose of God is to make us one in Christ**
Y—YET TO COME—God reconciles all things to himself

If unity of Jew and Gentile as one is at the heart of the eternal purpose of God, then let us purpose to do what we can to live out that reality. Let us, like Paul, give ourselves for the sake of the gospel for “the other.” *“For this reason, I, Paul, prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.”*

For this reason, we the church of WEFC, prisoners of Christ Jesus give ourselves on behalf of our African American brothers and sisters who right now are crying out to be heard. Lord, give us humble ear to hear and courage to engage so that you, God, would get the headlines in heaven and on earth.

¹Christian Smith *Divided by Faith* (New York: Oxford Press, 2000)7

²George Yancey, *Reconciliation Theology: Results of a Multiracial Evangelical Community Paper* presented at the Color Lines in the Twenty-first century conference, Chicago, IL

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Thinking back on your life, when was the first time in your life you remember race being an issue?

What do you observe about each of your stories?

Is there any racial diversity if your group? If there is no racial diversity in your group, how would imagine the experiences being different than your experiences?

Diving Into The Word

2. Read Ephesians 3:1 and discuss what it must be like to be in prison for the sake of “the other.” What does that tell you about Paul and his conviction?

What are some practical ways you can embrace the cause of “the other?”

3. Read Ephesians 3:1-13. Paul says that their unity in Christ as the church causes the “wisdom of God to be made known” (v. 10). When it comes to matters of race, what do you think is the role of the church?
4. Read Ephesians 3:14-19. What steps of “love” do you think the church could take in the current discussion on race?
5. Read Ephesians 3:20-21. Read these verses in light of the issue of racial reconciliation. What hope do these verses give you?

Taking It Home

6. What can you do to try to understand the story of someone different than you?