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Ephesians 3:1-12 – *Bringing the Outside In*

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Ephesians 3:1-12

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

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.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

I stopped in at Miller Crossing 1.5 weeks ago—

Where there’s a coronavirus outbreak—

In order to drop off the cards that our congregation made for them.

I was greeted at the entrance by registration tables acting as barriers...

Making sure I was allowed to enter;

Hand sanitizer to disinfect hands;

And nurses wearing face masks, face shields, and gloves.

I dropped off the packages of cards very quickly...

And out I went.

These last 9 months we've been trying to keep the virus out—

3-ply facemasks acting as a barrier to our lungs;

Hand sanitizer every time we enter and leave a building;

Washing our hands so regularly that they're raw;

2-meter distancing;

Prohibited from gathering in homes or at businesses—

All in the effort to keep the virus out of our system...

To keep this virus from infecting us and others.

In the 1st century, the people of Israel—**the Jews**—**tried to keep the Gentiles at a distance.**

Jews were known to snub the Gentiles...

Unwilling to visit or eat in their homes or drink their wine...

It was abnormal for Jews to be social with anyone who was non-Jewish.

Gentiles were on the outside.

Any Jew interacting with them risked becoming ritually impure.

It's as if the Gentiles had a virus...

And the Jews were trying to avoid catching it.

What the Jews were trying to do was remain set apart for God.

God chose them to be his special people—

And in order to maintain this special relationship with God—

They had to keep their distance from everyone else...

Anyone else who might lead them away from God...

Anyone else who was known to worship idols or act against God's law.

So, they did their best to keep the outsiders out.

Paul, who was Saul, was especially good at keeping the outsiders out.

Not only did he mask up and sanitize regularly...

He actively sought out this “virus” and tried to destroy it...

He made sure outsiders kept their distance!

Paul took it upon himself to punish the Christian sect...

Those from within Judaism who claimed to have special access to God through Christ.

These outsiders were most threatening...

Deserving of punishment.

Paul did his best to keep Jews and Gentiles (including Christians) separate...

What Paul didn't realize though, was that he himself was on the outside....

He was already “infected” we could say;

He had separated himself from God...

Because anyone not “in Christ” was on the outside.

When it comes to relationship with God...

Each and every one of us were on the outside.

God created us and made us his people—

Made us intimately close with our him...

We couldn't get any more on the “inside” than this—

But we distanced ourselves from him.

In our sin and transgression, we killed our relationship with God.

We were now outside of the intimate community of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...

Forced to live life separated from our Maker.

And you might say, “That's fine...I don't *need* God.”

But the problem is that we *do* need him.

Because he is the one who gives us life...

He is the one that continues to sustain life and makes it meaningful.

God is the one who gives life purpose and direction.

Relationship with him—

Back on the inside—

Is where we *know* we belong...

Our hearts and desires remain unsatisfied on the outside.

It is not a good place to be—

On the outside—

Separated from our Creator.

The grace in this passage though—

The Biblical message from start to finish—

Is that **God brings the outside in.**

First, God changes Paul's heart.

God grabs Paul and brings him to the inside...

Back into relationship with him.

This man bent on destroying the Christian church...

Undergoes a radical transformation on the road to Damascus.

The Lord strikes Paul blind...

Changes his heart...

And uses him to spread the gospel message.

The message he once detested—

That Jesus Christ is God in the flesh who comes to save his people—

Is the message that Paul now embraces and proclaims.

The people he once avoided (Gentiles) and persecuted (Christians)...

Are now the people he's preaching this message to.

What is the specific message entrusted to Paul?

Through the gospel, the Gentiles are brought in. (3:6)

The outsiders become insiders...

Put into relationship with their Creator.

In our passage, God, through Paul, is stressing the level of inclusion that the Gentiles receive.

There's a prefix attached to 3 words here that indicate their inclusion...

A prefix that means "together":

The Gentiles are called *together*-heirs;

God's people inherit God's promises:

Promises of eternal life;

Promises of being a part of the restored creation when God fully reigns.

Before, this inheritance was considered good only for God's children...

The Jews.

Now, in Christ, the Gentiles become together-heirs...

Children that inherit all of their Father's blessings.

The Gentiles are called a *together*-body;

It's thought that Paul invented the word used here...

Because this thought was so radical that no word existed for it.

God brought these 2 distinct groups of people together—

Jews and Gentiles—

And created one new group...

One new together-body in Christ.

No group was better than the other...

Each had the same privileges.

The Gentiles are called *together*-sharers of the promise in Christ.

All of the promises made to Abraham's spiritual descendants...

Are now good for the Gentiles.

As God promised to bless the Jews as his people...

Now the Gentiles inherit these blessings and promises...

Promises that they are God's people and God will be their God.

In Christ, a restored relationship with God is promised.

God brings the outside in.

He takes Paul—

Who is unknowingly separated from God—

And restores his life and gives him purpose in preaching the gospel of Christ.

God takes the Gentiles—

The avoided, spurned, outcast people—

And makes them a part of a new body of *his* people...

From the outside, now in.

Disconnected from God...

Now intimately connected with God and each other.

This is the underlying story of the Magi.

Magi from the east—

From other nations—

Coming to the light of Christ...

Recognizing him as King and Lord.

Epiphany.

God, bringing the outside in.

Are you on the outside?

Are you a stranger to God and to his promises?

The good news is that God brings the outside in!

He took a man like Paul—

Who was persecuting, killing, and imprisoning his people—

God took this man who was God's enemy...

And made him into his child and mouthpiece.

From the outside in.

There is nothing that can separate us from God's love.

If God is calling you into his love, into relationship—

Which I think he is—

There is nothing from your past or present that *he* cannot overcome.

It's not *us* overcoming.

Notice that in our reading, it's all passive language...

Things that happened *to* Paul...

Things that he was given:

“God’s grace that was *given to me...*”

“The revelation *made known to me...*”

“*Revealed* by the Spirit...”

“The *gift* of God’s grace through the working of his power...”

“Although I am the less of the least...”

“This grace was *given to me...*”

Paul did nothing to be brought from the outside in—

He did nothing to restore his relationship with God—

It was a gift.

It was all God’s doing *for* Paul.

That’s the way it works in God’s economy...

He brings us “in” through his own work...

God brings us “in” through the work of Christ...

Nothing that we do can make it happen.

So, if today God is calling you into relationship with him—

Or back into relationship with him if you’ve strayed away—

Then receive this as his invitation—

His gift—

To bring you back into his embrace...

From the outside to the inside.

This is the message to those on the *outside*...

But what about those already in a relationship with Christ?

What does the gospel message say to them?

Let's use the Grinch as an illustration:

In the 2018 Grinch movie (the new one)—

Which we've watched more times than I'd like to admit this year—

The Grinch is of course, the outcast.

By choice, he distances himself from the Christmas festivities and celebrations of the Whos down in Whoville.

Whenever he travels into town for food...

He's rude, inconsiderate, and unpleasant.

(story of Grinch at the grocery)

It finally comes down to the Grinch stealing Christmas...

Coming at night and taking all of the presents, decorations, and holiday food...

You know the story.

Eventually the Grinch has a change of heart...

He takes back all of their Christmas stuff...

Apologizes and heads back to his home on Mt. Crumpet.

Cindy-Lou Who—

We can say she's on the inside—

Comes to visit Grinch at his home...

To invite him to Christmas dinner.

"Me?" says Grinch, "But I took your gifts."

"Yeah, I know," says Cindy-Lou playing with Max.

"And your trees!" replies the Grinch, confused.

"Yup."

"I stole your whole Christmas."

"I know you did, but we're inviting you anyway."

"But why?" asks Grinch.

"You've been alone long enough."

You've been on the outside long enough.

So Grinch comes down the mountain to Christmas dinner...

Where a dozen or so Whos are gathered.

"Mr. Grinch, I'm so happy you decided to come," says the Who opening the door.

They all welcome him...

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Grinch!" they say to his utter shock.

He sits down at the table as one of the family...

Invited to carve the most-important rare roast beast.

From the outside—

Isolated up in his mountain cave—

Brought into relationship as a part of the family.

God's intent is that through the church—

Through you and I on the inside—

The manifold/many-faced wisdom of God would be made known.

The wisdom of God—

The mystery of God that is being revealed—

Is that the outsiders are being invited in.

Because Jesus Christ came and died for humanity...

The outsiders—

All of us—

Can be on the inside in relationship with God.

But the gospel message doesn't end with us...

It was intended to pass through us onto the next person.

The joy and meaning of Christmas passed from someone to Cindy-Lou's mom...

And from Cindy-Lou's mom, it passed to Cindy-Lou...

And from Cindy-Lou it was passed to the most unlikely recipient...

The Grinch...on the outside.

The people that are most different from us—

The ones who don't look like us...

The people that are rude...

The people we cannot stand...

The ones we try to avoid like the coronavirus—

(are there people you avoided as if they had the coronavirus long before we knew what that was???)

May just be the people God is calling into *his* family.

We're reminded in our passage that God is bringing the outside in.

The light of Christ is shining into this world—

It's shining through us...God's church—

To reach everyone God is calling to himself.

We are graciously invited to participate in God's work...

Compelling, urging, and loving people into God's family...

Praying that through his Spirit they would join his family for dinner.

And, when God changes their heart...

We receive them as one of God's own:

Together-heirs;

Together-body;

And together-sharers in the promises of Christ.

Amen.