

WGUMC Epiphany January 7, 2018 Ephesians 3:1-12
"The Gravenstein Gospel"

I am proud to be a minister of the Gravenstein Gospel. That's what I told the church staff members who got a jar of organic Gravenstein applesauce from me for Christmas. I was a big fan of this heirloom applesauce when Trader's Joe's used to carry it. And then they dropped it, and I've been in mourning ever since. So when Hank and I were planning to spend our anniversary at Point Reyes in November, I said, "Let's go to Sebastopol and see if we can find some Gravenstein applesauce."

Thanks to Google, we not only found an apple farm, but we found THE farmer who used to supply Trader Joe's. I bought two flats of applesauce, and I've been in heaven ever since.

Apparently, I will go a long way to spread the good news of the Gravenstein apple. The question then is, will we go to such lengths to spread the good news of Jesus Christ?

The three kings were willing to go a long way, farther even than Point Reyes, which ironically was named for them. The Spanish explorer Sebastián Vizcaíno named the peninsula *Punto de los Reyes*, King's Point, when he dropped anchor in Drake's Bay on the Feast of Epiphany in 1603.

As you may know, Epiphany features the three kings who were not really kings. The text calls them *magi*, from a Persian word for astrologers. They had been following a rising star that they interpreted to be a sign that a new king was rising. This was very unsettling to the current king who was not a legitimate ruler in the first place. King Herod was a Roman puppet. He was not even Jewish and his hold on power was ever precarious. So when the magi showed up to ask him where the new king had been born, the old king set out to do what fear drives all rulers to do: destroy anyone who might threaten him.

Paul, the traditional author of the letter to the Ephesians, knew all about these kinds of rulers. He was put in prison by one of them. Chapter 3 begins with these words: "This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles..." Like an officer in the Salvation Army, Paul had been given a commission of grace to bring good news to people who were not supposed to receive it. The Gentiles were not the Chosen Ones. They were not children of the promise. They were not citizens of the kingdom or members of the household of God.

But God had a different plan. Paul says that it is a mystery that had been hidden in history and only now is being revealed in Jesus Christ. This is God's plan: to enlarge the family, extend the inheritance, and expand the kingdom to include not just those at the center of power and purity, but those who have been shunted to the margins of the community. So now, Paul declares, even the Gentiles "have become fellow

heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Even the Gentiles can share in the "boundless riches" of Christ "in whom we have access to God."

This is the gospel that Paul is determined to preach. And this is really good news that not everyone wants to hear. It is a sad truth that not everyone wants just anyone to have access to God. We generally don't like seeing the "boundless riches" go too far out of bounds. We think that they shouldn't go to people in other churches or who don't go to church or who live on the wrong side of the tracks or belong to the wrong party. But as I look around, it seems to me that this bigger gospel is exactly what the world needs to hear today. No matter the risk; this is the mystery that we dare not let become history.

Turns out that God has a plan for that, too. Even if Paul had never gotten out of prison, God would still have gotten out

the word. The plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God was for the church to take up the job of spreading the gospel.

If 2017 taught us anything, I hope it taught us how important this job is. The best thing about all of last year's bad news is how it made me realize that we just have to be very intentional about focusing on the good news. So we went with the theme of Joy for Advent. And I assure you that I have no intention of dialing down the joy just because it's now January.

Last year was a wake up call for me. It was a real test of my faith, and I'll blame it on my family. My parents raised me to care very deeply about civic life. If I have an inheritance from them, it isn't money. It is the inescapable feeling of responsibility for making some kind of positive contribution to society. The great educator Horace Mann once said, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." That's my parents' philosophy.

So, as the divisions deepened and our communal standards of decency, respect, honesty and integrity kept falling left and right it made me feel ashamed for my country. The political situation tore at my heart. It dragged down my soul. By year's end, I was in dire need of an angel chorus singing good news of great joy for all people. Christmas came just in time to remind me of the boundless riches of Christ, without which I don't know where any of us would be.

As we embark upon 2018, I vow not to forget where we need to be. All year long, we need to stay on bended knee. If we have to leave the manger, then we better take it with us wherever we go.

Warned about Herod, the magi returned by a different road. We, too, need to return by a different road. What I mean by that is that we need to spend a lot less time worrying and more time wondering and worshiping; a lot less time dwelling on our problems and more time dwelling in the presence of

Jesus. We need to do this not only to save our own soul but to save the world as well.

As Paul says, this is the church's job: to live in the joy of Jesus. No one else is going to make the rulers and authorities know that no matter how much money or power or social media presence they have, they cannot drown out the Good News. They cannot tweet away the Truth. They cannot roll back the boundless riches of Christ. Nor can they ban anyone's entrance into the kingdom of promise. You don't need any documents or DNA tests. With boldness and confidence through faith in him, anyone—and I mean anyone—can walk right in!

Just as Paul wrote about the mystery that was unfolding for him, I write about a mystery that I believe is still unfolding for us. I have a hunch that the kingdom of God is far, far wider than even Paul thought it was and includes many people (and not only people) that we would be surprised to see there. The

church has been around now for almost 2,000 years, but we are still a long way from knowing the wisdom of God in all its rich variety.

This growing awareness that the revelation of Jesus Christ is still unfolding—in us—is a truth I love a whole lot more than I love Gravenstein applesauce. That we have yet to find any limits on the love of God is a gospel that I hope you love, too, because as a church we have a very big job to do. We have heard enough from the haters in the past year. The world needs to hear from the lovers: from every passionate advocate for peace, every joyful worker for justice, and every faithful follower of Jesus. The church doesn't have time to die. This year, by the grace of God, we are going to be far too busy winning a victory for humanity.