

WGUMC January 13, 2019 “Light of the Gentiles”
Ephesians 3:1-13

So what’s the plan? How many times do we ask ourselves that? What’s the plan to end the shutdown? What’s the plan to address the housing crisis? What’s the plan to mitigate the damage of wildfires? earthquakes? sea level rise? And closer to home: What’s the plan for keeping those new year’s resolutions? getting more exercise? losing those pounds? limiting screen time?

We want a plan. But even if we had one, by now we know that life rarely unfolds according to plan, according to our plan, that is. So we think we’d be better off if we knew God’s plan, as if that were knowable, as if God had only one plan and if we were to see it, we could somehow understand it.

The Apostle Paul must have been bewildered by God’s plan. And I’m not just talking about the time that God hit him over the head with it on the road to Damascus. Even as he begins his ministry, he must have been wondering: since Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, why were so many Jews unconvinced? Paul would go to a

city and find the Jews there but only a few believed him. He had far more success among Gentiles who had no knowledge of the prophecy about a Jewish messiah and probably wouldn't have cared if they did. But they were receiving the Good News. Paul must have been bewildered.

What was God doing? You might remember in Luke's Gospel that the old man Simeon comes into the temple and takes the baby Jesus in his arms and praises God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." [2:29-32] So, the Gospel of Luke tells us that God in Christ is on a mission to the Gentiles.

But why was Paul, a devout Jew, the one who was sent to the Gentiles? He didn't even like them. He had never had any dealings with them. What was he supposed to say to them? It's a mystery.

Paul writes to the Ephesians, “I am the very least of all the saints.” When you think about it, Paul is no Peter. He isn’t preaching sermons that convert thousands. He isn’t hanging around the temple, which is media central, working miracles. No, Paul is wandering around out there, far from Jerusalem, talking to people on his travels, gathering with people in their homes, and doing the slow, grueling, often thankless, frequently dangerous work of trying to convince one skeptical heart at a time.

Paul could not preach his way to success if he tried. As he told the Corinthians, “I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom.” [1 Cor 2:1] And yet he came accompanied by a power that he could not explain. God gave him a special commission of grace to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who were outside the boundaries of the promise, who were not included in the covenant.

This is the mystery of Christ that was “hidden for ages in God”: that the grace of God is available to absolutely everyone, that the

boundless riches of Jesus Christ cannot be kept within boundaries, cannot be captured, sequestered or otherwise restricted by or for any tribe, nation, race, culture or religion. Few of us can appreciate what a radical plan this is. Christians, especially, have trouble going along with it. Oh, we believe in Jesus alright, but we tend to keep him to ourselves. Like living in a gated community, we are keen to put fences around his riches. Some of us actively try to keep others out or at least charge them dearly to get in.

One of the craziest things I've heard about this border wall debate comes from the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas. Responding to those who have called the wall immoral, he said that if the wall is immoral, God is immoral, because there is a wall around the New Jerusalem in heaven. He was talking about the passage in Revelation, Chapter 21, where it describes the heavenly city surrounded by a great high wall made of jasper. The wall has twelve gates, each one made of pearl. But if the good pastor reads this vision of heaven literally, then he should keep reading, because the

chapter goes on to say of that wall, “It’s gates shall never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.” [Rev 21:25] So even if heaven has a wall, the gates are open.

In Ephesus, Paul is talking about the plan that had been hidden for ages in God. But for ages, the Church has been working against the plan. Name the century, name the church, and you will read the history of folks just like us who have taken the name of Jesus only to build walls and shut gates, to keep out the people we don’t know, the encounters we are too afraid to have, and the changes we don’t want to make.

This is a far cry from how Paul conceived of the church and what it was supposed to be. The church was supposed to be a mediator of God’s wisdom to the world, not a barrier to it. Paul says that “*through* the church the wisdom of God in all its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” If you’re like me and are not sure what this verse means, let’s try to unpack it so we can apply it.

Paul was given the grace to bring the Good News, to unveil the plan that Jews and Gentiles (in other words, the whole world) be fellow heirs, members of the same body who share in the same promise. [Eph 3:6]

This is the crazy plan that Paul is commissioned to preach and the church is supposed to teach. This is the wisdom of God in its rich variety. Now, I'm lucky to have a husband who reads the Greek. I ask him, "Hank, what is the Greek that gets translated "in its rich variety"? What is Paul saying about God's wisdom here? The word is *polypóikilos*. Literally, it means "many-hued." Literally, Paul is talking about the *multicolored wisdom of God*. I love it. If our churches were more multicolored, think how much closer we would be, how much more legitimate our claim to the wisdom of God in all of its rich variety!

How much God do we not know because our churches typically don't include all colors? Our young people, who are growing up in a much more multicultural, multi-colored world than the one we grew

up in, would tell us that were missing out on a lot, if they weren't also missing. Most of our churches don't have all the ages, either. Walk into your average church and you will notice a relative absence of young adults. You could almost say that the so-called millennials are the new Gentiles. We have no dealings with them. On account of that, we don't understand them. And if we asked them, they would probably tell us that they never think of going to church because church doesn't speak to them, doesn't connect to their world in any meaningful way and doesn't model a life that they are seeking to live. It doesn't really matter that the gates in the wall are shut to them, for they have no burning desire to get in.

What is God's plan for them? Are we in the church content that there are lots of young people out there who are fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the same promise but don't know it? Are we okay with keeping from them the boundless riches of Christ just because we don't know how to communicate

those riches to them? And do we assume that if we fail, they will never encounter Christ?

The church has often thought that its job is to bring the light of revelation TO the Gentiles. But this week I had the opportunity to see how the Gentiles can bring the revelation to us. I spoke to a Nazarene pastor who is leading a young adult ministry in Palo Alto. It's a long story, but she is part of something called The Possibility Project that has gathered together some young adults to live, worship, learn and grow together. She talked about nurturing these young adults so they could release their gifts into the community and create new possibilities for ministry. By God's grace, they are figuring out some amazing ways to do that. Millennials with a mission. I love it.

I realized that while the church has struggled to be a light to these particular Gentiles, these Gentiles have a light of their own and they just may be the best equipped to lead the church's ministry in this new chapter of our history. And this revelation is finally being

made known to what Paul calls the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, but in this instance, I will call the Bishop and her Cabinet.

I have mentioned to a few of you that our circuit has been chosen by the Bishop and Cabinet to look at the possibilities of starting a young adult ministry somehow, somewhere in the South Bay. Because of the success of the Joint Youth Ministry, which has graduated hundreds of youth out of the program, we have been given a commission—we pray that it is a commission of God’s grace—to figure out how to build on the firm foundation that Christ has laid for our teenagers. We don’t want to build a wall around them to hold them hostage. We want to give them the raw materials so they can build their own bridge to a meaningful, make-a-difference life in Christ in their 20’s and 30’s and beyond. Or, as Ephesians puts it, until they “come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” [4:13]

We don't yet have a plan for this. But if we ask Lisa or Kat, they will tell us that working with young people is less like Peter's preaching and more like Paul's working, less time spent in the temple and more time traveling. So, we will have to prepare ourselves to do the slow, grueling, often thankless, frequently dangerous work of trying to engage one skeptical young heart at a time.

We may be a long way from a plan, but we do have a commission, and I believe that it is backed by a power we cannot explain. But so, too, are each of you. What is your commission of grace for 2019? Are you aware that you have been given the boundless riches of Christ? They are yours for the taking: healing, hope, love, faith, joy, peace, truth, grace. What are you going to do with them? Whose hand are you going to hold? Whose heart are you going to touch? Whose life is going to be transformed this year? Maybe yours. Ready or not, God's plan, hidden for the ages, is unfolding in you. What are you going to do?