

“The Mysterious Economy of God’s Grace” based on Ephesians 3
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on July 28, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Lately in staff meetings, Bruce Moser, our choir director, has been getting pretty frustrated with me. You see, during the academic year, Bruce can’t attend staff meetings, but during the summer, he has been sitting next to me asking, “Why don’t you just get a new computer?” My computer has just been so slow and so finally, last week I got a new computer. As you start to set up software, you know what comes up – the Terms and Conditions. Do you agree to these Terms and Conditions. Does anyone actually read them?

What I’ve found interesting is that this new computer offered me the 10,000-word long version, and then also a shortened summary of that version that was just a sentence or two. Basically, it claimed the massive 10,000-word Terms and Conditions said that they would not misuse my data and that if I ever wanted access to all of my data, I just need to ask, and they’d give it to me.

What on earth does that even mean? The 10,000-word version didn’t explain it either. It was just legal jargon, enough to put me to sleep. I did not get very far into it. I just accepted the terms.

Can you imagine asking Google or Microsoft, Lenovo, Samsung, or Apple, for your data? What would that even look like? Would it be a list of every file you’ve ever created? Would it be the code behind everything you’ve engaged with on the internet? Would it be the aspects of your profile used in targeted advertising? You know the creepy ads that you just seem to talk about something and suddenly your phone has an ad for it. Imagine how much information that would be. One thing I know for sure is that it would not be easy to read.

Yet, they offer this because they think this is what we think we want, because how often do we use that buzzword – Transparency. We just want transparency, we say. We think that if someone is required to bare it all, then they can hide nothing from us. Yet even in plain sight, with all of that information, there is still mystery, The problem is you have no one to interpret it for you.

When we hear the word mystery today, it doesn’t always have a positive meaning. We might think of mystery cults, those groups that believe crazy things. Sometimes mystery is used as a copout – Well it’s just a mystery. Transparency has a good reputation and implies a valid reason to trust, but Mystery implies secrets.

But in scripture, Mystery has a very specific meaning. It refers to that which is hidden in plain sight. Mystery is not a hidden secret or exclusive way that only the special get to know. Instead, it is the interpretation of a whole lot of data, to understand what it means. There will never be an explanation of it all of it, until perhaps we meet God. But when we engage the mystery without trying to get God to bare all to us, we admit with humility that we don’t know everything. When we’re willing to admit we don’t know everything, only then can we truly engage God.

In our reading today, Ben read Paul’s mention of the “household order of God’s grace.” This word, “household order,” is often translated in very different ways. In the King James it is rendered as “dispensation.” That is an order of time. In the Revised Standard Version, it is “stewardship.” That is an order of resources. In the NRSV, it is “commission.” That is an order of duty. In the NIV, it is “administration.” That is a business order.

The word used here, however, is “oikonomia” which may sound familiar if you say it fast.— Oikonomia, Oikonomi, Economy. Yes, this is the word from which we get the modern word, economy. The oikonomia in ancient Greece was the household order. It was the administration of the home, which was often a business. Oikos is the word for home. The Greek yogurt Oikos, just means home. So, oikonomia means, “way of the home.”

I would argue that given the last chapter, which we read last week, ended by saying we are no longer strangers or aliens, but citizens among the holy, or saints, and in the household – oikos – of God, It might be better to go super literal here and use the term, “household order.” This is because Paul then describes it as a mystery – the mystery of the Messiah – namely that all nations, ethnicities, are joint heirs with Israel.

The mystery is that through the good news, which is the story of who Jesus is: Namely, the eternal Son of God sharing in our humanity in Jesus to live as we live, to die for us in the suffering and shame of the Roman cross, betrayed by his own people, only to rise for us and ascend for us, sending the Holy Spirit to us to be God with us in this age, as a down payment, until we inherit the full and complete life of the age with God.

This mystery was hidden from the ages past in God, but was there in the Hebrew scripture. God’s grace in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and what it means has been present in scripture all along. Yet you couldn’t quite see it, until it was revealed in Jesus. It had been hidden from sight, a mystery, while it was in plain sight. The mystery then is revealed in the interpretation, Paul says that interpretation means that not only Israel is joined to God, but all people. All people are welcome in the household order of God.

Beloved, often the whole of scripture can feel like one of those Terms and Conditions. If you’ve ever started to read it, especially when you get to the genealogies, it can feel like that. But scripture is a story, with mystery meant to challenge us and guide us. In our transparency-loving age, we want there to be a plain meaning and one meaning. We want to say this is definitively what the text means. We want there to be a be all and end all that we can latch on to. We struggle that there can be different interpretations. We want to know who is right.

But for Paul, at the center of the mystery is the inclusiveness of God’s grace. As I said last week, when we hear nation, we tend to think of a nation state, but that’s a 200-plus-year-old thing. In the middle ages, they limited this word to Gentiles, meaning non-Jewish. But when the first readers of this letter heard Paul speak of the “nations,” they would have thought of the different ethnicities and pagan nations around them. They would have imagined the people of the world whose cultures were centered, not on Hebrew and the God of Israel, but on many native languages and native gods.

The mystery of Jesus the Messiah is the household order of God’s grace. It is an order that means all are invited to recognize the action of God in the world and be transformed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit within us. This is so the Messiah may dwell in us through faith, and it is the faith of the Messiah, which is a gift from God to us, just as this revelation is God’s gift for us through Paul. Part of this household order is merely recognizing that God who acts first.

This is important to remember because in today’s world, there is a lot of pressure to accomplish things – to be all you can be and live your best life. If things aren’t going the way you think is ideal, you just throw it all away and begin again. We’re told we can live again, a new life in this life.

We are told that our value is some heroic journey or personal magnificence. You don't need to read many memoirs to see that they are often easily split into three themes. One is the will to power and I persevered. I am great and I have overcome. Then you get the memoir of someone finding who they really are and all fell into place. Third is the memoir where the person says they discovered they are meaningless and found a power outside of who they are. Pretty much every memoir falls into those three categories.

The first two are all centered on our accomplishment. If you are reading that kind of memoir, maybe you start to feel like you need to be like Marcus Samuelson, a great chef who gives up all and perseveres to win by the power of your own will. Or maybe you'll be like Glennon Doyle and say, I'm just going to be me and finally everyone will love me. Or maybe you read the third kind of memoir and realize there is something more and persevere knowing there is something bigger than you.

That last one is what Paul is telling us to look at here. There is something bigger than us – a mystery that takes the pressure off of us. You know what, if you keep striving to just overcome by your own power and you fail, perhaps you're not Marcus Samuelson, the great chef who conquers New York City, then you will think you failed. What's more, you have no one to turn to. You can only blame yourself. This only adds to the shame you may feel. Or perhaps, you find your identity like Glennon Doyle and you change yourself to finally be who you really think you are. If you find out it didn't fix everything, then do you blame?

But if you realize you are transformed by a God who loves you, it's different. You may well have some great accomplishment or find meaning in discovering who God made you to be. But you will know that you always have recourse and to answer to a God who loves you and wants you to grow.

The mystery of God's grace economy is that you are enough. Exactly who you are – no matter where you come from, what you've done, how confused you are, what you've been in the past, or who you are now – all of it is enough to God. You don't have to change yourself to be loved by God. Instead, God will transform you because you are already meaningful to God.

You are called not to be the same person always, but with open eyes you can recognize God at work in your life. You can recognize those spaces where maybe there was something bigger than your will or magnificence. There is a power of love from a God who loves us and went through everything we go through.

In closing, I'd like to call out the song we sang, "Two Hands," by Townes Van Zandt. This was another situation where it was a total accident by our working that Jeff and Laura wanted to do this song. It just worked out perfectly. God was at work.

The lyrics go, "I got two hands; I want to clap my hands together. I got two legs; I want to dance to heaven's door. I got one heart; I gonna fill it up with up Jesus." Here's where I'll change it a little bit to say, "I'm gonna let Jesus fill it." I changed it because again, even your faith is not your responsibility, as if you have to read the Bible an exact number of times to be a good Christian. No, our call is just to we open ourselves to see where God is at work in our lives and recognize that it is God who acts, not us.

Then there's the last line, "I ain't gonna think about trouble anymore." It's not that trouble goes away, but that we recognize trouble is a part of life. This is what Paul spoke of when he said his tribulations, his imprisonment, were for his readers, for the church. He told them literally not to "act wickedly," or as many translations put it, "lose heart," because his trials are for their glory and ours. The trouble is real, but we don't need to dwell on it, except that it reveals where God is needed and where God is at work.

Remember this, because this is part of the mystery. More than anything we think we can accomplish or imagine, the truth is that God can do far more. And through the power that is in us, the Holy Spirit, also, God can do much more through us. Amen.

Two Hands by Townes Van Zandt

I got two hands; I want to clap my hands together	And warm is the light pouring from his mighty windows
I got two legs; I want to dance to heaven's door	And that light, my friend, it shines on you and me
I got one heart; I gonna fill it up with up Jesus	
And I ain't gonna think about trouble anymore	When the wind blows on that faithful morning
	And I close my eyes, Lord, and fly my body home
Well now, this old world sometimes it does get lonesome	I don't want my friends to cry no tears about me
And it's many a grown man has hung his head and cried	I'll be bathing in the glory of the throne
Down in your soul there's one that won't desert you	
Ain't it fine to have the Saviour by your side	I got two hands; I want to clap my hands together
	I got two legs; I want to dance to heavens door
Now the Lord resides inside a house of golden	I got one heart; I gonna fill it up with up Jesus
And faith is the door and love is the key	And I ain't gonna think about trouble anymore

Ephesians 3 (Fresh Translation): By this favor, I, Paul, am the prisoner of the Messiah Jesus for you, the nations.

If indeed you have heard of the household order of God's grace, then it is according to the revelation God made known to me, which has been given to me for you. This is the same mystery I had written about earlier in brief, which you are capable of reading to understand my insight into the mystery of the Messiah. In other generations this was not made known to the children of human beings in the manner that it has been revealed to his holy apostles and the prophets in the Spirit.

The nations are joint heirs and a joint body and joint partakers in the Messiah Jesus through the good news. By this, I became a minister, according to the gift of God's grace having been given to me according to the working of his power. To me, the very least of all the saints, I was given this grace to preach to the nations the unsearchable riches of the Messiah and enlighten what is the household order of the mystery.

The mystery had been hidden from the ages in God, the one who created all things, in order that the multi-diverse wisdom of God should be made known now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms through the church. This is according to the purpose of the ages, which God accomplished in the Messiah Jesus, our Lord. In the Messiah, we have boldness and access, in confidence through his faith. Therefore, I implore you not to act wickedly during my tribulations for you. My tribulations are your glory.

For this favor, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in the heavens and on the earth is named. I do this in order that he might give you, according to his glory, the ability to be strengthened by his Spirit in your inner person. This is so that the Messiah may dwell through faith in your hearts in love, being rooted and being foundational so that you may be strong to possess with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth, to then know the love of Christ that transcends knowledge so that you may be filled into all the fullness of God.

Now to the one who is powerful above all things to do, through the power working in us, above and beyond what we ask or think: To him be the glory in the church and in the Messiah Jesus to all the generations of every age. Amen.