**“How Do You Know?”**

**Ephesians 3:1-12**

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**Epiphany Sunday[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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In 2013, the owners of Sweet Cakes by Melissa in Oregon refused to make a wedding cake for a lesbian couple. The bakers soon became the darlings of the religious right, touring the country, raising hundreds of thousands of dollars from Christians fighting for the freedom to bake cakes only for people whose marriages they endorse.[[2]](#footnote-2) These wedding cake battles are working their way through the court system as they should. But while the legal outcomes are critical - perhaps the most important thing for the people involved - I still scratch my head that Christians are the ones leading these battles against gay and lesbian people. I still find it unthinkable that Christians are the ones whose religious beliefs lead them to want to exclude. Most people don’t share my sense of surprise.

Ever since the Christian faith joined forces with the Roman Empire that once persecuted the church – an unholy alliance if ever there was one - Christians have twisted our faith to condemn, oppress, subjugate, injure, and kill other people in the name of our religion. There is no shortage of examples. Christians sometimes know the details of these examples more than people outside the church. It’s why so many of us today comb through our theologies with a fine tooth, looking for anything that might sow the seeds of hurt. It’s why we lose many young people before they actually know enough of the faith to knowledgeably reject it. It’s why Jesus is often seen as a problem in a lot of liberal-leaning churches. Jesus as the way, the truth and the life is seen as the fulcrum on which the church’s exclusionary message is leveraged. We’ve seen the hurt that our own people have caused. We’ve seen the cancerous hate that grows.

Like some of the emails that the lesbian couple in Oregon received from so-called Christians: “I am buying up my ammo right now you filthy, ugly, disgusting, fat, stupid, cruel, anti-Christian piece of liberal scum," one message read. "I am getting ready for the war so I hope you have a good hiding place, you sick, disgusting, miserable, piece of degenerate lesbian scum.”[[3]](#footnote-3) And lesbian couples trying to enter lifelong monogamy aren’t the only ones receiving these kinds of messages. Ask some of our Muslim friends attacked or slandered after the last election. Ask people of color who, like all Americans, heard the President of the United Stated say there were good people on the side of white supremacy. Ask the immigrants to our lands whose most vehement opposition comes from white evangelicals.

It’s not hard to see why so many of us have taken a hard look at the church and asked ourselves, do I really want to affiliate myself with an institution whose members are committing these kinds of sins? Do I really want to raise my kids in a faith whose members read a Bible and worship a Lord they believe commands them to exclude like this? Do I really want to attend services that send some people out into the world strengthened in their zeal to discriminate against people - people like me or people who I love?

It saddens me that so many of us have come to accept the reality that Christians always seem to be leading these exclusionary fights. It saddens me that more people don’t share my sense of surprise that Christians could be the point people for theologies of exclusion. My surprise is not that religiously-fueled exclusivity exists. It is that it comes from the same church whose first radical act was the pronouncement – the conviction – the belief – that the covenant established with Israel – with the Jewish people – had been mysteriously opened to everyone through Christ. To people who had seen in this God of Israel the only true God. The living God. The unusual God that demanded not blood or gold, but justice as measured by the wellbeing of the alien, the orphan, and the widow. To people who found themselves transformed by that God, to people who longed to be included in the family of that God, the church said – *you, too, are included*. To Cornelius and his family - the Gentile convert – visited by the Holy Spirit – *you, too, are included*. To the Ethiopian eunuch touched by the Word of God in scripture – *you, too, are included*.

That’s the message from Ephesians today. That’s the mystery that the writer says has been revealed in Jesus – “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This God who has chosen a special people for salvation and for service. This God has more than enough love for everyone. There’s a place for you, too, in this unconventional family. There’s a place for you, too, in this covenant. There’s salvation for you, too, with this God.

That’s not to say that the covenant established with Israel was exclusionary before Jesus came along and fixed it. Gentiles may have been irrelevant to God’s purposes in the world, bystanders in the drama between God and people, but they weren’t despised from the Jewish side. Quite the opposite. Gentiles hadn’t expressed a desire to be with Jews. They had spent hundreds of years demonstrating their hatred of them.

And then Jesus came along and a small group of Jews saw in him the Messiah opening a doorway of salvation to people who wanted to be part of that great drama. And Gentiles who encountered Jesus and his followers began to hunger to know the Torah and the God of Israel to whom it points.

Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker of the 12th century, said that Christianity and Islam “served to clear the way for King Messiah to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord.” Through them “the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become familiar topics.” Or as the modern orthodox rabbi Michael Wyschogrod marveled about the church, “Can anything but joy fill the heart of Israel as it observes the mysterious way in which the God of Israel begins to be heard by the nations?” The mystery of a church that “transcends national boundaries, substituting a community of faith for one based on language and soil.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is the mystery that the author of Ephesians points to. The mystery that the God of Israel was now being worshiped by more than just Israelites, by more than just Jews. That those divisions that so often had resulted in the persecution of Jews had fallen in the presence of Christ to create a community the world had never before seen. So that “through the church,” Ephesians states, “the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.” The wisdom of God revealed in the diversity of the Christians community – Jews and non-Jews brought together to worship the one living God. The wisdom of God revealed in its diversity before diversity was even a word in anyone’s lexicon.

That is why I’m shocked everytime a Christian seeks religious freedom to proclaim restrictions on God’s grace. That is why I’m shocked everytime a Christian proposes building a wall to keep marginalized people out. That is why I’m shocked everytime a Christian draws boundaries around God’s love rather than proclaiming the wideness of God’s mercy.

Because the witness of the Gospel is that light has come to everyone. That’s the significant of epiphany. The magi – people outside the Jewish faith – followed light meant for them. They came to the manger and looked around and marveled at what this God was doing in the world. Light to everyone. Community of faith, not based on land or soil. Shepherds and magi, and a king born to a peasant couple.

It’s why we need this story. It’s why we need the Jesus at the center of the story. Jesus is the corrective to the church’s tendency to exclude, not the cause of it. Jesus is the window through which we come to know God’s irrationally generous love, not the cloud that overshadows it.

Every statement that we make about God ultimately has to be put to the question, “how do you know?” How do you know that God’s love is wider and deeper than you imagine? How do you know that God includes you in the covenant? How do you know that love of the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, the oppressed is inextricable tied to the love of God? How do you know that the church must expand its borders, work for the unity of people across race and clan and religion and sexual orientation? How do you know?

We know because of Jesus. The one who told his own disciples - don’t turn away the children. The one who talked to women and was led by them, welcomed the poor, dined with the rich. The one who learned from a Canaanite woman, healed a Syrian soldier, and taught that Samaritans – that is, our enemies – can be good. We know because of Jesus.

The first great conflict in the church is whether or not Gentiles are included. The church answers the question with a resounding yes. Perhaps the encouraging news for us today is that not everyone saw it that way from the beginning. It took the church decades to hear that same message that has come to so many of us in way or another. The voice of our Savior saying, “Yes, you too are included.” “You, too, are a part of the family of God.”

1. Ephiphany, always 12 days after Christmas, landed on Saturday this year. Being the Protestants that we are, we celebrated it on Sunday. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The Hate Keeps Coming,” Casey Parks, *The* Oregonian, July 12, 2016, <http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2016/07/sweet_cakes_lesbians.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Maimonides quote is found in Michael Wyschogrod’s must-read book, *Abraham’s Promise: Judasim and Jewish-Christian Relations*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman’s Publishing Company), 2004, in the chapter, “Israel, the Church, and Election,” pp. 179-187. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)