

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 60:1-6
SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 3:1-12
January 6, 2020

“All Are Welcome In”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

On Christmas Day we got news that made my mother cry. But it made her cry for all the right reasons.

Years ago this congregation took in a Russian teenager who had escaped to this country all on his own. His finances were quickly exhausted as he was taken advantage of by those who exploit the vulnerable, and he was sleeping in the Catholic Church when he turned up here one Sunday morning. Eventually Michael, as he preferred to be known rather than his Russian name Vitaliy, ended up living with my parents for a number of years. He went to college, graduating from Villanova. He worked for Vanguard. Then he started his own business and bought a house. He brought over and raised an adopted brother, Vasya. And when he finally became a citizen after years of struggling with ICE, he took the name Farrell as part of his last name.

Along his journey Michael discovered through raising Vasya that he was pretty good at the parenting stuff, and so he started fostering children. Tomorrow he is adopting three children from the same family, six-year-old twins and their older brother. These children have experienced horrors in their young lives. Their father is in prison for what he did. The twins have been with Michael for two years, their brother a little less because he was with another foster family first. With Michael they have found healing and safety. Tomorrow, all three of them are changing their names, completely. They decided to do this. They actually chose new names for themselves. Sam will become Edward Farrell. Hawk-I, very happy to shed his odd name, will be Zachary Farrell. He has already told his teacher to call him Zach. And Eric, the most frail of the three, will now be Jonathan Farrell. And so my mother cried, because we have just added three new Farrell children to the family, without, as she said, a single labor pain. Is this not the most wonderful way to grow a family?

We take it for granted that we can come to God. We take it for granted that God loves everyone. We assume that we belong, that we're part of the family. But that is a huge assumption, because for centuries faithful Jews assumed that only Jews belonged to God. Only Israel had been chosen. Only Israel had the Law. Only Israel had a series of covenants with God. While other nations might be “blessed” through the Jews, this blessing was very indirect. Short of conversion to Judaism there was no belonging, and some very

hardcore members of the faith rejected even that. Some believed that to be Jewish involved more than faith—it had to be in the blood.

What Paul claims in Ephesians is something totally and radically different. Paul claims new revelation. While it is sometimes difficult for us to understand Paul, this is what he is talking about when he describes “the mystery made known to me by revelation.” The dividing wall separating Jews and Gentiles has been taken down, according to Paul. Jesus has come to bring peace and eliminate the barriers to God. For centuries it was one way. Now, says Paul, through Christ, **a new thing has happened**. The Gentiles have been welcomed in to the family of God. *And they have been welcomed in without having to convert to Judaism first*. All they need to do is to repent of their old way of life and have faith in Christ. It is not blood that makes them family; it is faith.

This is a NEW THING. What better way to start a new year than to talk about a new thing? While this plan of God has been there from the beginning, Paul says it has now been revealed. And the way it was revealed is joyously laughable. Gentiles just started coming to faith. It proved impossible to stop them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit like everyone else! God moved and everyone else had to run to catch up. The conclusion the early apostles were forced to come to was, “Who are we to question God?” The decision to include Gentiles wasn’t a top down decision. This was a bottom up movement. The Holy Spirit was changing lives and they had to catch up.

Paul describes what happened in ways that are challenging for us because we don’t think in 1st century terms. He describes it in terms of inheritance. The Jews are the heirs of the promises of God. The mystery that God revealed to Paul was that God has now included Gentiles as members of the family with equal access to God. They are not required to keep the Law in order to earn their place in the family. They have been adopted by grace and are no longer second-class citizens. Gentiles haven’t displaced Jews, but have been invited to join them on an equal basis. Of course Gentiles were an unlikely group for God to include. And they did have to turn away from idolatry and worship the true God. But they did not have to be circumcised or keep the ceremonial and dietary laws.

The fact that this dynamic was bound to cause problems is fairly obvious to us. Taking a human analogy, having one child in the family expected to fully obey a set of laws while adopting another who is not, and then giving BOTH equal inheritance, is a recipe for family war. In the 1st century when Ephesians was written it was early days in the process. Most congregations were either predominately Jewish believers or predominately Gentile believers. This served to temper things for awhile, but conflict was inevitable.

It did not last long, this period of time in which some Christians kept the Jewish law and other did not. Politics, war and human nature tore Christianity and Judaism apart. Eventually even those from Jewish backgrounds gave up keeping the Law as the balance of membership shifted towards a new Gentile base. In the process the seeds of some nasty anti-Semitism were laid as both sides said some harsh things about the other. In this time of rising hate we

need to remind people that God did not create the church to replace the synagogue. These are our sisters and brothers who are under attack. We need to speak on their behalf and offer our protection.

The fact is I have a lot of sympathy for the Jewish leaders who rejected Paul's ideas. To make the radical claim that in Christ Gentiles are not just *blessed*, but they are **full heirs** of the promises of God, was bound to go over like a brick in the average synagogue. It would be fair to say that this radical new idea was heresy. This was a total break with the past. But I have always suspected that God is a heretic. We make nice neat systems with rules and boundaries and God just blows right through them.

We can argue with Paul, but it's hard to argue with God. The fact is it was just flat out happening. Gentiles were coming to faith. And in response the Church had to come up with some kind of explanation. This appeared to be a deep mystery, a plan of God long hidden but now revealed by the Holy Spirit. All races, classes and genders were coming to faith. God was creating something entirely new. God seemed to be incredibly busy with a very diverse group of people. In fact, the very diversity of the Church appeared to be central to its nature. To BE the Church was to BE from all different types of people brought together as one. In God's plan everyone who was once excluded is now included.

Paul clearly had an epiphany that changed the course of his life. And this new thing—the Church—is meant to be a living example of what God wants for the world. Tragically we fall very short of that ideal. We are supposed to be a living example of grace, to show in our lives and our community what reconciliation and healing looks like. When our society is at each other's throats, we are to demonstrate the way of love. It is possible to have a diverse unity and a unified diversity. It's not easy. It requires our cooperation with the grace of God. But it is possible.

God has continued to open doors throughout the centuries, and just like in the beginning, there are always going to be those who cry "Heresy!" and try to slam the door shut. But we have seen the Spirit at work and followed the Spirit's leading. The Holy Spirit does anoint women for ministry. Who are we to oppose God? The Holy Spirit does bless gay and lesbian and transgender people with genuine faith. Who are we to close the door? The Spirit is always one step ahead of us, always making the table bigger, always setting for just one more, because in God's family, all are welcome. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6

60 "Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

² See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.

³ Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
⁴ “Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
⁵ Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
⁶ Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

Ephesians 3:1-12

3 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.