

No Plan B

Ephesians 3:1-13
July 3, 2016

Back in 1988, I really had no idea that God was going to call me to be a pastor. I graduated high school, worked all summer as a dishwasher and table busser at the Plantation Supper Club, turned 18 years old, and then headed off to Northwestern College. I was registered as a Phy Ed. Major; I can still remember the bright gold and purple work out suits they had us wear. Yeah, it was the 80s alright.

Northwestern required certain Bible courses for every student. And, that fall I began a level of Bible training I'd never had before. But, more than that, I found myself around other Christ-followers who were following Jesus with an intensity I'd never witnessed before. A guy named **Barry** had this old blue 4-door car. He couldn't even see out his back window because he had plastered the phrase "JESUS SAVES" across it. When I first saw that sign I thought, "This guy must be one of those loonies, a real freak!" And, you know what, he was. He was sold out for Jesus. And my own faith was challenged to go deeper, to pursue greater passion.

Over the course of my freshman year I found myself praying longer, more consistently, and for bigger goals than ever before. I found myself singing and worshipping with other college students, sometimes for hours at a time. This country boy from northern WI found himself in downtown Minneapolis on the corner of Lake and Hennepin witnessing to the street people and shoppers who were passing by. Long story short, by the beginning of my sophomore year, I'd fallen in love with preaching the gospel and teaching God's Word. I switched my major to Ministry.

God put a call on my heart to become a pastor. I didn't see it coming but God knew all along. It's been 27 years since then and I haven't regretted it a single day. Oh, it's been hard sometimes but I've known that I'm where God wants me, doing what He's called me to do. And that...makes all the difference.

In our passage this morning, we're going to hear about Paul's call to ministry. It will cause each one of us to consider what God is calling us to. Paul begins Eph. 3:1 with the phrase, "for this reason," referring back to chapter 2 where we learned about the One New Humanity that Jesus created; reconciling Jews and Gentiles to each other and to God through the cross. And now, in chapter 3, Paul is about to tell us his prayer for the Ephesian church.

But, before he gets to that prayer, he interrupts himself with a digression in vv. 2-13. He seems to get completely off track but he is compelled to share a few things with the Ephesians and they are so important that he doesn't get back to his prayer until the end of the chapter, in v. 14.

The first thing shared is **1) Paul's Call to Ministry**. Paul says in **Eph. 3:2**, "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you." This word "administration" can also be translated "stewardship."¹² God is the one who called Paul to his ministry to the Gentiles.

In **vv. 3-4** Paul explains that it was a mystery that was revealed to him by God. He's already written briefly about this mystery back in chapter 2. But Paul wants to make sure that they understand why he has particular insight into it. And, he tells them in v. 5 that "it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets." So Paul is talking here about the message that he and the Apostle Peter and the other NT apostles and prophets have been preaching.

In **vv. 7-8** Paul further describes the ministry that he was called to. He says, "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power...this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ."³

Not all of us necessarily get as clear of a calling to ministry as Paul did. But, every Christ-follower is called to ministry; that's why God still has us here. Otherwise, when we were rescued from sin, we'd just go straight to heaven. We are here on this earth as ambassadors for Christ.

¹ See οἰκονομία – "responsibility of management (of a household)" or "Arrangement, order, plan" in Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 697). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² See ESV.

³ Gal. 1:15-16 tells us, "...God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles..."

How are you stewarding your calling? One of my favorite sayings comes from a brother in the Lord named John Wagar. For many years John sold paper products for a living. He once said to me, **“I’m a missionary cleverly disguised as a paper salesman.”** That is such a great illustration of what it means to be a Christ-follower.

How has God commissioned you? God commissioned our **Nationals Challenge Team** to travel 1,000 miles to Louisville, KY. They’ll arrive today around 1:00 p.m. **Camp Oak Hills** will have campers arriving today ~ 4:30 p.m. It’s 3 miles away and God has commissioned lots of people to help with cooking, leading cabins, helping at the waterfront, etc. In fact, there is a current, urgent need for help in the kitchen, even this week. **Mike Schultz** is headed for Uganda in August. He’ll travel almost 8,000 miles and be away from his family for 2 weeks. But, he is on mission with God and he wants to be where God wants him to be.

How has God cleverly disguised you as his missionary? Some of us are called to **stay at home**. If that’s your situation, then that’s your mission field; your family, your neighborhood, your community. Some of us are **tourists** who have traveled here to Bemidji for the 4th of July weekend. In a few days, you’ll head back home. Where is home for you? That’s your mission field. That’s where you are called to ministry.

Just like Paul, God’s grace has been given to each Christ-follower. The only question is how we will steward that grace through our lives?

The second thing Paul shares during his digression is **2) God’s Mystery Revealed**. In **Eph. 3:6** Paul lays it out plainly for us: “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.” This is what we learned about last week from chapter 2 so we won’t spend a lot of time on this part today.

Eph. 3:5 tells us that this mystery “...was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed...” And, later **Eph. 3:9** tells us, “...this mystery...for ages past was kept hidden in God...” You’ve probably heard it said: **“God works in mysterious ways.”** How many of you know where that verse is in the Bible? Don’t raise your hand, it’s not in the Bible. This saying probably comes from the hymn writer, William Cowper. In the year 1773, he wrote the words to our hymn #73, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”⁴

There will always be a certain mystery to God. And, it’s helpful for us to acknowledge that in our lives from time to time. God revealed this mystery to Paul in His perfect timing. But, there are many other mysteries still out there.

Let’s move on to the third and final thing Paul shares in his digression: **3) The Church’s Purpose**. **Ephesians 3:10** reveals God’s intent: “...now, **through the church**, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.” God’s wisdom is described as manifold or many-sided. It’s multifaceted, like a beautiful, well-cut diamond. Perhaps you heard on BBC⁵ news this week that the world’s second-largest gem quality diamond has been discovered in Botswana, South Africa. It was over 1,000 carats. It’s the largest find in more than a century. It’s about the size of a tennis ball and it’s valued in the millions of dollars.



There is no question that these gems are quite beautiful. And, they are a good illustration of our text this morning. The beautiful, manifold wisdom of God is made known **through the church**. We are meant to sparkle and shine and draw attention to the wisdom of God.

Have you ever thought about what the purpose of the church is?

Let’s brainstorm a little: **what is the purpose of the church?** We’ll do this by looking at a skit called, **“McChurch.”**

"Welcome to McChurch! May I take your order?"

⁴ He may have gotten his inspiration from **Isaiah 55:8-9**, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” See also John 13:7.

⁵ The 3,106-carat Cullinan diamond was found in South Africa in 1905 and cut into nine separate stones, many of which are in the British Crown Jewels. “The significance of the recovery of a gem quality stone larger than 1,000 carats, the largest for more than a century... cannot be overstated,” William Lamb, the CEO of Lucara Diamond, a Canadian diamond producer, said in a statement...The stone is yet to be evaluated, but commodities and mining analyst Kieron Hodgson, told AFP news agency that “the potential to be one very expensive diamond.” In April a flawless 100-carat diamond was sold for \$22.1m (£14.8m) at Sotheby’s in New York. (The head of Sotheby’s jewellery department in New York, Gary Schuler, described the diamond as “the definition of perfection”. “The colour is whiter than white, it is free of any internal imperfections and so transparent that I can only compare it to a pool of icy water,” he said before the sale.) See BBC.com

"Yes, can you tell me what types of churches you have?"

"Oh, we have every different kind of church. We have big churches and little churches. We have religious churches and non-religious churches. We even have non-churchy non-churches!"

"I'd like something that requires no effort. And I certainly don't want to give any money! Oh, and I only want to attend once or twice a year. And make sure the service is under 30 minutes, I hate those long-winded sermons that try to teach me something."

"We have just what you're looking for. It's our 'Holiday Special'. Do you need anything else?"

"No thanks, that's perfect!"

"Thank you, have a nice day."

"Welcome to McChurch! May I take your order? ...Sir? Umm, Sir? May I help you?"

(removing ear bud) "Oh! Yeah. Sorry. I was texting my girlfriend. Hey. I want a tech savvy church. You know, something online where I can be completely anonymous. I want to log on whenever I want, like when I reach the next level of Color Switch."

"Well, sir, that would be our Wi Fi Combo. Would you like that with fellowship?"

"Oh no! Not at all! But, do you have an app for that?"

"Sorry, I don't. But you do have the option of meeting at the coffee shop if your computer crashes. They let you log on for free! Have a good day!"

Welcome to McChurch, may I take your order?"

"Hello. I am looking for a church with no judgement. I want everyone to approve of everything I do. And I certainly don't want anyone talking about sin or holiness! It needs to be all about the love. And acceptance. And letting me be free to make my own choices."

"We have the perfect church for you! It is our Anything Goes Special. No Commandments included."

"Thank you! That's exactly what I wanted!"

"Welcome to McChurch. May I take your order?"

"Yes, I'm looking for a church where I can really help out. You know, use all my building skills. I believe the more I do, the better chance I got of getting through that narrow gate and into those pearly walls. I can't stand people who aren't willing to work hard."

"Would you like that with or without grace, sir?"

"Oh, definitely without. How could I earn it if someone puts grace in it? Oh, and I also want it to be very serious and holy. Keep everything rigid and tightly organized."

"We can do that. We have lots of churches like that. Hey AI, we need one religion, heavy tradition, double the works, hold the grace!"

"Thank you."

"Welcome to McChurch. May I take your order?"

"Yes, I want a church that has hardwood floors and lots of large, stained glass windows. And the preacher has to preach for 60 minutes, no more and no less. Are you getting all this? Oh! And it has to have a big organ with huge, well-polished pipes that reach to the ceiling."

"Yes sir, one 'make your own combo' coming up! Have a nice day!"

"Welcome to McChurch. May I take your order?"

"Hi! What kinds of churches do you offer?"

"Oh, we have everything! Traditional, funky, holy rollin', even make your own combo. You name it, we got it!"

"Well, I'm looking for a personal relationship with God?"

"A what?"

"You know, a relationship with God where I can talk to Him and sing to Him and go to Him with my problems, share my whole life with Him on a daily basis."

"I'm sorry ma'am, we don't have anything like that here. How about... oh, let's see... here's something about communing with nature. Does that sound O.K.?"

"No, I think I'll keep looking. I know I read something about it in the Bible, there must be one somewhere. I'd really like to get to know God personally, so that He knows me by name and I can be His friend."

"Well, have a nice day sir. Sorry we couldn't help. (pause) Oh... ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"If you do find anything as wonderful as that, would you come back and tell me about it?"

"Yeah, sure. Goodbye."

The crescendo of this entire passage this morning is **Ephesians 3:12**, "In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence." **This freedom** is a greater freedom than any other freedom we enjoy. Ephesians 3:1 tells us that Paul was writing this from **prison**, while his own freedom was being hindered. But, it did not stop him from writing to the Ephesians about the freedom that is truly important. It didn't hinder his call to ministry.

What is the purpose of the church? To show people the freedom we have to approach God. To reveal to people that through faith in Christ, we can be in a personal relationship with God. There's a camp near Upsala, MN called **Camp Lebanon**. Their motto is "**A meeting place with God.**" That's a great motto!

Our desire as the EFC of Bemidji is, "**To Promote the Supremacy of Christ by celebrating His love, obeying His truth, and enlarging His kingdom.**"

By celebrating His love, we mean the great love with which God loves us. And we respond to His love in **worship**; loving him with all of our **heart, soul, mind, and strength**. We also celebrate that love by **loving one another** as brothers and sisters in Christ, Growing in Love."

We obey God's truth because it sets us free from the lies we used to believe, lies that held us back and made us miserable. His truth instructs us in the right way to live and how to enjoy His best for life. In **John 10:10** Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Jesus came full of grace and truth!⁶

Enlarging His Kingdom is about being a **Grace Community with open doors**. We are following Jesus together and inviting others to follow Christ along with us. **None of us is perfect**, that's why we are called a grace community. We've all fallen short. We've all sinned. But, through Christ, we've found a relationship with God because our sin problem has been dealt with.

So we live out our call to ministry, as a church and as individuals. **Whether we are a pastor or a missionary cleverly disguised as a paper salesman**. Like the Apostle Paul in Eph. 3:7, we have become a servant of the gospel. We tell people about Jesus and we serve others in Jesus' name.

There is No Plan B, this is it, right here in this room.

God's intent is to make His beautiful wisdom known through the church.

We are inviting others into a personal relationship with God.

It's a high calling. It's an incredible mission. It's why we're here!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Let's not just come to church; let's go out and be the church!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on July 3, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

⁶ John 1:14