



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

June 14, 2015

"The Manifold Wisdom of God" (WORTHY Sermon Series)

The Rev. Steve Peich

When I first came to Hawaii about 25 years ago, I was immediately smitten by the utter beauty of this place. I thoroughly enjoyed the rich culture here, as well as the food, the music, the way of life. For me it really was – and continues to be – Paradise.

However, when I first arrived I found out that this *was not* the view of everyone, not even of a few local people. I remember one day when I had to get insurance for my car. When I got to the office, I met a younger local woman. We talked some about the different places I have lived. And then to my utter shock she said something I'll never forget: "I can't wait to get off this rock!"

That's how she described what the whole world sees as Paradise—a rock to escape from.

Sometimes we forget or lose perspective of the treasures we have in life. Sometimes this even happens with some of the blessings we have in and through Christ; they too are often greatly unappreciated.

Today we will continue our study in the book of Ephesians. Through this sermon series we are learning how we are to live a life worthy of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

So this morning I want to look at something that is essential to our call and essential to a thriving life with God. Something that unfortunately has been often derided or devalued in recent years - and that is the Church.

In the US the Church over the last couple of decades or so has been in the

decline in many circles. Some sociologists say the decline in attendance in our country has been due to several factors. Among these factors has been the rise of the Nones and the Dones.

The Nones are people – particularly young people – who have no religious affiliation. In fact, a third of adults under 30 fit into this description. Some of Nones, perhaps even the majority of them, were formerly religious. Many of them still regard themselves as spiritual persons, but they simply no longer identify with any religious institution or denomination.

And a second factor has been the rise of the Dones. These are Christian people, and often these are committed Christians, who, for various, feel 'done' with the church. The Dones say they are "fatigued with (the Sunday routine of) plop, pray and pay," so they decided to quit church.

I have a feeling some of us have been down that road. Not only do we *not want* to "plop, pray, and pay," but also we are also SO done with the infighting, the splits, and the politics, etc. I totally get that and don't blame the Dones for feeling what they feel. But here is the crucial thing: As crazy as we churches can get, there is no Plan B from God.

Eph. 2.21-22 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

As you heard read just before I came up here, God, in and through Jesus Christ, is joining people together to become His living "dwelling place" or "living temple" on earth. There are two billion Christians

in the world. It is not so much that He is creating two billion temples, but *one temple* out of two billion Christians. And this temple is to be impacting the world through their unity in Christ.

Now we all know that history is strewn with many tragic stories where Christians completely lost this vision for unity and being God's holy dwelling place, and ended up creating unspeakable damage. That's everything from the small damage created by parking lot gossip to the actual killing of our very own brothers in Christ.

In a few weeks we will be celebrating the birth of our freedom as a nation. But have you ever thought for a moment whom we had to kill in the process? Not just what nation they were, but what faith they were? Or perhaps the most glaring tragedy is the Civil War. Not only was it American killing an American, but also all too often it was Christian killing a Christian.

When we juxtapose Paul's sublime statement up there with the reality of our Christian history, it becomes downright heartbreaking. Just think of all of all the horrors of humanity – in this country alone, that would have been avoided if our unity in Christ predominated over every other feature of our differences.

Yes, I know we would still have had some tragedies. I don't doubt that. But my questions is, when the non-believing world looks *to us* for another way to deal with differences, do they see something fantastically, world altering different, which Paul alludes to here, or more of the same?

Sometimes I wonder if it is the lack of a compelling difference that is part of the reason that an increasing amount of folks are becoming Nones and Dones.

My own dad was one of those Dones. We used to work a lot together, and as we worked, he and I used to always have deep conversations: what was the meaning of life, the existence of God, if evolution could be reconciled with the bible, etc.

When I was in my 20s he told me that he won a special award as a kid for never missing Sunday school for ten straight years! Eventually I asked him why he didn't attend church anymore. His answer had nothing to do with a change in beliefs. He simply said, "I couldn't take the hypocrisy I saw. We shouted and praised God one day and by Monday I saw those same people being mean and nasty with their wives and their kids, just like everyone else."

In other words he saw no compelling difference between Christians and non-Christians, so he just became done with church.

Some of you sitting here may know exactly what he is talking about. You really want to know if Jesus makes a REAL difference in life; a real difference in making the world a better place. Paul is going through great lengths in the first three chapters in Ephesians to say – Absolutely!

In Paul's day when Jews and Gentiles looked at each other, they saw plenty of reasons to be divided. As Pastor Dan mentioned last week, *before* Jesus came to the scene, the Jews and Gentiles were worlds apart, by customs, traditions, spirituality and politics, even as they lived in the same town.

But because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, everything changes. Jesus destroyed the barriers the world created between each other for millennia.

Look at how Paul puts it succinctly and poignantly in Galatians 3.

Gal. 3.26-28 You are all sons (and daughters) of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither

Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In our local culture where EVERY Church is a multi-ethnic church, it is hard to appreciate what a big thing this was back then. As one theologian noted: There was probably *no other segment of people* during that time who taught that a slave owner must treat a slave as his brother; as one who had Equal value in this world. Bottom line, Paul's statement here would have been mind blowing in his day. Paul calls this amazing development by God, a great mystery.

Eph. 3.6 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.

By mystery he does not mean something that was mysterious and veiled and that you needed a secret formula to unlock it. Rather it is something God had to reveal to us because we could not get to it *by our own logic*. It is mysterious because it seems counter intuitive.

By logic and by reason the early Jewish Christians felt that the Gentiles had to become a little Jewish to be a Christian. And this created more than a few divisions and disagreements.

But Paul is saying that through Christ there is a NEW union and equality among the people in Christ—a world-altering example of God's intended plans for life on this planet.

Why do I may such a grandiose statement? Let's unpack verses 10-11.

Eph. 3.10-11 His (God's) 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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Notice that through the Church something called the "manifold wisdom of God" was to be made known in the

universe. That sounds like such a grand statement doesn't it? But I think he is using such a grandiose phrase on purpose because it is such a grand plan.

We need to understand something very important here. This wisdom is not simply about Jews and Gentiles holding hands around a campfire singing *kumbaya*. Rather it's about how Jesus Christ changes every relationship to the core.

The manifold wisdom of God is about enacting and displaying, as a church, a new humanity - a new society. A society that is a preview to the eternity, where Christ unites once and for all the hostile sections of humanity into one people.

Notice in v. 11 God's eternal purpose has been accomplished – *past tense* – through Christ. What does that mean? Well, in part, it means that something of eternity *has broken into* the present times through Christ and continues to build toward eternity.

The way I read the gospels Jesus didn't come to simply to start a new church, then takes a Break for a few millennia, and then comes back to clean up the unfinished mess and Re-create a New World.

Listen how one great NT theologian, NT Wright states it:

What the New Testament really says is God wants you to be a renewed human being helping him to renew his creation, and his resurrection was the opening bell...Our future beyond death is enormously important, but...we're called, Here and Now, to be instruments of God's NEW creation, the world-put-to-rights, which has already been launched (by the resurrection)

Pretty heavy duty. But what are the implications if he's right? How many times do you and I pray with great fervor and sincerity: "Lord, Your Kingdom come, Your will be Done – ON Earth – as it is in Heaven." Are we not praying – Lord, NOW – in this day - make this world *as it shall be* in eternity.

As Dallas Willard, a great Christian thinker, wrote before he died: "There is no 'then' or 'when' to the kingdom of God. This reign is a current, progressing, maturing reality, ... *today*"

Sometimes it seems that some of us Christians feel that Jesus' kingdom is on hold, on pause, until He gets all that Armageddon thing over with. But my friends don't believe it. Again, Dallas Willard puts it succinctly, "Eternity is already in session."

Jesus' eternal plans to end division of every kind, is already in session. His plan to rid the human race of sexism, racism, and every thing that shatters human relationships, is already in session. And the biggest venue through which such magnificent work is to be done is the people of God.

This is why I find this statistic mind-boggling: Eighty-one percent of all Americans truly believe "you can be a good Christian *and not be part of a church.*" That kind of thinking would have left Paul absolutely mystified. It's because what Paul is saying is that the Church is indispensable for the world to understand the brilliance and wisdom of the gospel.

You may sit here and think this is "just another Sunday morning." But from what I see in the Bible, you sitting here on this mundane Sunday morning is part of God's grand world-altering plan to change reality.

That's why we need to see anew that there is no ordinary day in the church. There is no ordinary gathering of the people of God. We don't simply plop, pray, and pay. Whether we come together in this large meeting, or meet in class room, or in small groups, or one on one to pray, encourage, disciple and share life together as Christians, we are to display the *world altering manifold wisdom of God.*

This is why a ministry like HIM – Hawaiian Islands Ministries – is so vital. They do not simply offer some cool seminars to learn many things. But it is one of the few times we Christians in Hawaii *are more than* our denominations. We are *more than* our different skin colors, *more than* our political leanings, ethnicities, or socio-economic ways of life.

God's intention, in the present time, is to give the world a preview of that cosmic unity and ultimate healing of relationships through the community of the people of God.

So my question for you, my brothers and sisters, is what is YOUR place in that grand plan? Your place in being an answer to Jesus' prayer of God's kingdom come His will be done on earth and not just in Heaven? For example, what is your place in displaying the breakdown of gender divisions in your workplace or in your family life?

My brothers, our children are learning from us what it means to live with the female gender. With every word you speak, with every action you take toward your wife, you're either tearing down a division or building one up. I pray that by your words, your nurture of your wife, they way you deal with conflict with her, your kids are getting a preview of heaven now.

That when your friends at work, who want to show you porn, or make some crass joke about a female, they see and hear by your response a preview of heaven now.

When those around you want to trash someone because of their political ideologies, or belittle someone because they struggle with their sexuality, I pray that by your response of integrity, compassion, and love, they get a preview of heaven now.

Can you see what I'm saying? Even though what Paul laid out seems so grand, it is in the small, everyday moments where Heaven can break in; where the wisdom of God can penetrate this sinful planet and change it in some real way.

Let me share a very small and concrete way we can break down divisions in real life. These ten words have the power of Superman to tear down divisions and heal deep wounds. It's something a friend taught my wife and me 25 years ago, and has deeply impacted the culture our family life.

They are: "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you please forgive me." Let's say that out loud. Now turn to your spouse and say it. (Just kidding!)

These words may not seem like much, but I promise you that if you make these words part of the DNA of your marriage, of your parenting, or of your work place, it will heal all sorts of divisions.

I remember at the last church I pastored, a man was upset with me about something, so he asked me to come to his business to share it with me. He spent a few minutes telling me how what I said hurt him. When he was done, I simply said, "Dave, I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you please forgive me."

Oddly enough, he looked a bit stunned. It was obvious he did not expect that reply. He probably was expecting defensiveness on my part or a minimization of my wrongdoing. But I simply said those words, and immediately the heat lowered in the room and we had a very pleasant conversation.

Parents, let me just say this real quickly. It's okay for your kids to see that conflict sometimes happens in marriage (as long as it is not severe conflict). But what they need to see WITH the conflict and the slight tear in relationship is that it is followed up with humility, taking responsibility, and the intentional effort toward reconciliation.

You see, it's the small but potent things we say and do that can manifest the manifold wisdom of God in our families.

I have seen how these big lofty ideas of Paul get played out in very real, tangible, and life changing ways, and how they bring healing to others. It happened with me.

When I was in my late 30s, we moved to California to attend seminary. We went there right after experiencing some tremendous hurt in the church. It was a time where I wanted to join the Dones.

My wife, my two young kids, and I moved into an apartment complex near the seminary campus. It was a pretty non-descript place with about 40 residents.

In that two-story complex, we had singles and marrieds and divorcees and even one couple going through a divorce.

We had couples with kids and couples who knew the heartbreak of not being able to have kids.

There were Asians and Asian Americans, and Africans and African Americans, as well as all kinds of Caucasians. There were extroverts and introverts; Republicans and Democrats; conservatives and liberals; Presbyterians, Nazarenes, Methodists, Baptists, and Pentecostals. Some even struggled with severe emotional disorders and suicidal tendencies. We sounded more like a reality show than a spiritual community.

But despite being so different, all of us chose to look beyond our differences and related to each other by our common faith in Christ. We exchanged knowledge and food and a few glasses of wine. One guy used to brew his own beer in his apartment!

We celebrated birthdays. We baby-sat for each other. Some guys taught my son basketball and hockey and the martial arts, and some women taught my daughter piano. Everyone had to teach me about this thing called the Internet.

We prayed with each other. We laughed with each other and argued passionately with each other. We shared stories of pain and abuse, and sought solace in each other.

We gave each other counsel when we were going through tough times. We confessed sins to each other and announced God's forgiveness over each other.

And what was really amazing to see is that the things that made us most different often made us wiser and much deeper. I learned of the deep pain of racism from my black brother's stories shared over breakfasts. I learned of third-world poverty and hardship from my African neighbors below us. I learned to appreciate the uphill battle it was for women to be taken seriously in church leadership. I knew a little about all those issues before living here, but sharing life with these folks brought my knowledge to a whole other level. And I

was the wiser for it. For me, in those two years, eternity was already in session. It was the richest experience I ever had of Christian community.

But here's the thing: none of it was a church program. Nobody led it but everyone built it. And each one of us was forever changed by it. All because we decided to appreciate that which made us different, and were intentional about what Eternally connected us through Christ.

And when it was all done, that hurt, angry, defeated minister (me) found healing and new life, as well as a new vision for ministry and community. That's what happens when people experience in real and tangible ways the manifold wisdom of God.

Does this mean we should all go to seminary to experience this? Not at all. Seminary *was not* what made it great. It was simply because of *whom we decided to be with each other*, as we went to seminary, that made all the difference.

Just because you come to this large gathering or join a church small group does not guarantee that you will experience the kind of community Paul speaks of in Ephesians 3. You can join a garden club and still experience a bit a heaven because the issue that matters is not what we are doing, but how we decide to be with each other as we do it.

Look, let me be honest. I'm not trying to be Pollyanna here. I have been deeply hurt by church. I have been burned out by its needs, bitten by its gossip, bruised by its betrayal, impoverished by its pay scales (but not here). I have felt used up and stepped on, ignored, and marginalized. But at the end of the day, *the Church is still* God's greatest instrument to change this world. Let us live a life worthy of the manifold wisdom of God.

Before we finish let me make one last, very brief, but very important point. In verse 8 Paul says "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

The risk I run in presenting you this grand vision of the work of God is that you begin

to feel quite small in the process. Most of us sit here today thinking: "Who am I to contribute of any significance to this grand work of God?"

I sometimes feel that several times a week. Seriously. Let's face it. I'm not here as a preacher and teacher and pastor because I'm some sort of spiritual giant. I know my roots. I'm a former garbage man, for goodness sake. I worked as a janitor all through grad school. In seminary I was repeatedly reminded of how my enunciation is deplorable. When I preach I frequently jam up my words and speak too loud or crass.

But despite all this, God has given me His grace to preach His message in this world. And the crazy thing is that He uses it. If my question is "What can I do based on who I've been," I won't get far. But if I ask instead, "What can I do based on who HE is in me," then a whole host of possibilities open up.

In a minute we are going to sing, *Take My Life And Let It Be*. Don't just sing those words; PRAY them. "Here am I, all of me, take my life, it's all for Thee." When that becomes the passion of our hearts you'll be amazed of the grace God will give to you to show the world that eternity is NOW in session.

