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Ephesians 1:15-23

Religion Beyond the Evidence

The main theme of the letter to the Ephesians is God's plan to reconcile Jews and Gentiles. There was this longstanding hostility between the Jewish people and non-Jews. To get a sense of the animosity, we might think of the present-day fighting going on between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. One wonders how it can ever be overcome.

The author of Ephesians believed God had a plan to overcome the entrenched hostility between Jews and Gentiles. In the letter, he indicates that reconciliation between the two groups was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, the author's vision went beyond human reconciliation. He believed God's final purpose was unity and harmony in the entire universe and that the church was the means of accomplishing that purpose.

That's a lofty expectation for the church. Maybe that should be our mission statement: "The mission of First Parish Church is to bring unity and harmony to the entire universe." That might be a bit of a reach for us. We're having trouble balancing the budget, right at the moment. We haven't even been able to gather everybody together in over a year. We're not entirely sure who's still with us. I've been a pastor here for six months. This is my first worship service in the sanctuary. There have been a few slight disagreements over the years at First Parish Church.

Honestly, when it comes to unity and harmony, the church hasn't exactly led the way. A thousand years ago, the church split into east and west. Roughly five hundred years later, came the Protestant Reformation. Protestants broke away from the Church of Rome. Those Protestants divided up into innumerable sects and denominations and the track record around getting along and cooperating with one another is sketchy.

My favorite illustration of this comes from a story told by comedian Emo Philips. He said: *I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So, I ran over and said "Stop! Don't do it! There's so much to live for!" He said, "Like what?" I said, "Well...are you religious or atheist?" He said, "Religious." I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?" He said, "Christian." I said, "Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" He said, "Baptist!" I said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?" He said, "Baptist Church of God!" I said, "Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?" He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God!" I said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?" He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!" I said, "Die, heretic scum" and pushed him off the bridge.*

Admittedly, it can be hard to think about the church as the catalyst for sweeping change in our world. The church as a whole wasn't doing so well before the pandemic. By

now, I'm sure we're all aware of the trends in mainline churches of declining membership, declining worship attendance, and decline in the church's status in the community.

The author of Ephesians informs the struggling church in Ephesus of God's plan and God's desires for them. In our text today, he prays for them, which in itself, is something to note. The relationship between this author and the church in Ephesus is spiritually grounded. Churches need prayer. Pastor Dan and I need your prayer. This church needs your prayer.

Here's what he says, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power."

I can't say I know for certain what this author means, but he prays that the eyes of their heart will be enlightened. It seems to have something to do with seeing. Do you know how sometimes things aren't as they appear? You meet someone for the first time and you form an impression. When you really get to know them, you realize they're nothing like what you thought.

I went kayaking on the York River the other day. You can find yourself in a place that appears peaceful and serene, but I realized what's really important is what's going on under the surface of the water. If you work with the current and the tide it can make a huge difference.

The author of this letter prays that the eyes of their heart will be enlightened, that they will be able to see something that may not be immediately apparent. In this case, the evidence might suggest the church is weak. The evidence might suggest the church is feeble and ineffectual. But he prays that the eyes of their heart will be enlightened, that they will see what God is doing below the surface of things. He's talking about having faith that goes beyond the evidence.

He names what that is. As vulnerable and flawed as this community of faith may seem, the power of God is at work in it. He writes, "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but in the age to come."

Then, the author claims God has made Christ the head over all things for the church, which is his body. That's this author's way of saying the power of God that was put to work in Christ is also at work in the church. The evidence might show the church is in decline. The evidence might show the church has lost its way. The evidence might suggest the church is a dying institution, but this is religion beyond the evidence. This is faith that recognizes there is more going on than meets the eye. This is seeing with the eyes of one's heart enlightened.

I'll share with you a little about what the church has meant to me and my family. My dad was a pastor in churches for 36 years. A long time ago, I asked him why he became a minister. He explained. He said, "Both my parents died by the time I was 5-years-old. My

brother and I went to live with my Aunt Harriot in a small apartment in Brockton Massachusetts. We didn't have much. In fact, I didn't have a bedroom. I slept on the couch as a kid."

He went on to say, "Just down the street from our house was a church. I used to spend most of my time there after school and on Sunday. He said, "The people in that church became my family. Because of that, I never wanted to be anything but a pastor."

I'll bet every one of you here today, or joining us from home, has a similar kind of story. High school was a living hell, but the leader of your church youth group showed interest in you. Sunday nights in the church basement became a refuge and a place to belong.

A loved one died and the church flooded your mailbox with cards and well-wishes. A couple of the church ladies set up a schedule and casseroles began showing up at your front door.

You walked into a church one day not knowing what to expect and not knowing anybody. Someone noticed your discomfort. They walked up to you and said, "You sit with us." That simple invitation meant everything.

I'm in the habit of praying for the church and the people on our prayer list, but I've decided to begin praying a particular prayer for this church and I invite you to join me. I pray that God will give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation. That's it. Wisdom is about having good judgement. It's about soundness in decision making. A spirit of revelation is about understanding the things of God. It's about the Spirit providing insight into what God is doing below the surface.

Let's all pray for this church, that God will give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that with the eyes of our heart enlightened, we may know the hope to which God has called us, what are riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe.

Because we are not just coming back from this pandemic. We're not just regathering. We're coming back strong. We are Christ's body. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead will raise us. Our life together almost certainly won't look the same as it did prior to the pandemic. No doubt we'll get some things wrong. We will probably be behind the curve when it comes to lifting precautions. Technology will not always be kind to us, but we will experience resurrection.

Evidence will suggest that we don't have everything all figured out, but our religion goes beyond the evidence.