

Administration of the Mystery  
January 13, 2013  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John Cleghorn

Text: Ephesians 3:1-12

Last week on Epiphany Sunday, we considered the opening verses of the book of Ephesians. We looked at what its author called God's "plan for the fullness of time," our adoption and redemption in Christ Jesus.

Today on the church calendar is a day set aside for remembering Christ's baptism, that holy moment we heard about in our reading from Luke. The Holy Spirit descended from the heavens and marked Jesus as God's beloved.

We take time to remember this because God has claimed each of us in the same way. God has said, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Last week in the training class for our newly elected elders, we discussed the sheer power of these words and how they relate to our baptism, that moment when we are grafted into the church, the body of Christ.

What, then, are we baptized to do? Who is it that we are called to be? Are we to dwell passively in the peace of knowing we are adopted and redeemed? Is that all there is to it? Or is there more to it? Some things, perhaps, that we neglect to do?

A few minutes ago we heard another passage from the book of Ephesians. Maybe it was the apostle Paul, maybe it was someone writing in his tradition. Regardless, the author continued to explore what it means to be a people gathered in Christ's name, gathered for a purpose, gathered for a reason, gathered by the "mystery" of God's grace.

As with last week's reading, this morning's Ephesians text doesn't hesitate to use that same word, "mystery," to acknowledge that there are some aspects of God's will and purpose that we do not fully see. As God's people, we have to get used to the fact that God is always a step ahead of us. But that is no reason to sit and watch as God works God's divine purposes out. To the contrary, we play a role, as individuals and as the church.

To that end, this morning's reading from Ephesians gives us a phrase worthy of deep consideration. In Chapter 3, verse 9, Ephesians speaks of how God extends grace,

what Ephesians calls “the boundless riches of Christ” to Jew and Gentile alike. This, Ephesians says, is the “plan of the mystery.” Other translations of the original Greek language say that God’s inclusive grace is the “administration of the mystery.”

The “administration of the mystery . . . .” That’s an interesting phrase, isn’t it? We can be paralyzed, frozen in our tracks by the thought of God’s mysterious ways. But here we have the idea that, in at least one sense, there is part of that mystery that is to be “administered.” Now that’s something we might get our minds around, something we might do with our hands and feet.

Look up the word “administered” in the dictionary and you’ll find that it means to “be in charge of” or to “preside over.” In our modern parlance, we speak of doctors “administering medicine” to help in healing. We look after another person, perhaps an aging parent, by “administering to their affairs.” In some parts of life, an oath is “administered” as a pledge, a promise to live in a certain way. In our courts, judges are sworn to “administer justice” that achieves fairness and equity.

Each of these images describes how we think of God . . . as a healer, as a judge, as one who calls us to live a certain way, as one who looks after the affairs of the world. But the author of Ephesians is referring more specifically to the church. Paul and those early Christians, of course, could not foresee the church as we know it today. Instead, the church, as they saw it, was a movement, rather than a building. This movement, was called, in part, to stand in stark contrast to earthly powers and principalities.

As scholar and pastor David Bartlett, who now serves my home church in Atlanta, has written:

“Earthly authorities manifested rules and dominions of more than earthly origin. The church does not sit idly by or silently accede while the powers and principalities do their work. We speak truth to power and ‘the rich variety’ of God’s wisdom against the deadly uniformity of this or that official line.”<sup>1</sup>

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Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are gathered at a moment when the plotting and planning of earthly powers and principalities is in strong evidence. But it is also a moment when we, as the church, can speak truth to power and be a mouth piece for God’s wisdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary in Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, p. 211

For the last two years or so, we have witnessed mass gun-related tragedies in this country at a rate of about one every 60 days. What once were the names of otherwise ordinary cities and towns have become icons of our national mourning. Blacksburg. Binghamton. Fort Hood. Tucson. Aurora. Columbine. Newtown.

These and our other places of grief and loss should add up to be enough reason for us as a nation to act. But that is only part of what ails. They reflect a larger obsession with violence that is a cancer on our national character.

By now, you know the statistics. More than 31,000 Americans die in gun-related deaths each year. That's 87 a day, one every 3.5 hours. The University of Chicago Crime Lab reports that the national cost of gun violence is \$100 billion a year. Imagine how many people that \$100 billion could feed, house or heal. There are, roughly, as many gun retailers in America as gas stations. In fact, there are 10 gun retailers for every one McDonald's restaurant in America. Talk about a super-sized appetite for violence.

Then, just Thursday, in what could only be described as hauntingly surreal, a teenager in California opened fire on his classmates, on the same day that Vice President Joe Biden met with the National Rifle Association.

Now, it seems, we as a people finally appear ready to act. At least, we are talking about acting. Even at this hour, representatives of both sides of the debate are making their case on the Sunday talk shows.

On one side are those who see utterly no reason to restrict access to guns or question the average person's need to own a military assault weapon that can kill dozens of people in seconds. On the other side are those who say that America's relationship with guns and gun violence today bears no resemblance to what our forefathers conceived in the Second Amendment.

For the record, let me say I've handled more than a few guns in my life. At summer camp as a kid, I was a better-than-fair marksman shooting a 22-gauge rifle at paper targets. I enjoy shooting clay skeet when I have had the chance, especially when I hit them. But all of that is something far, far different than what we are talking about.

What then, is the administration of God's mystery, will and wisdom in this matter? What, we should ask ourselves, is the role of the church? As those who have been baptized into the body of Christ, what is your role? What is mine? Some would say that the church has no place in the political fray. But this is not an issue of Conservatives or Liberals, Republicans or Democrats. It is an issue of life or death. Surely Christ did not

come for this. Surely the one who overcame death itself calls us, in this debate, to be pro-life.

As in the days of the first Christians at Ephesus and elsewhere, the powers and principalities of our day bring powerful resources to the defense of the status quo. But the Gospel compelled those first Christians to take on the powers and principalities then, just as it does for us today.

It's a funny thing about us Presbyterians. We love organization. We love order. In the dictionary by the word "organized," they should put a picture of our favorite saint, John Calvin. But we don't organize for social action much at all. So why not demonstrate equal orderliness and organize to administer God's will in this matter of gun violence? We love "decency." Why not speak up for what is truly decent in a civil society?

At a conference last week, I spent some time with J. Herbert Nelson, the head of our Washington office. What, I asked him, is his advice, as one who speaks for our entire denomination?

First, he said, we can do the same things every American can do. We can work the political system. We can write letters to the newspapers that name our Washington Representatives and call them to action. We can flood the offices of our Washington representatives with calls to do the right thing. We can write and sign petitions. Make your voice heard, loudly and clearly, he said.

We can also stay in close touch with and support any initiatives our Washington office may undertake. If you would like to do that, there are some sign-up sheets on the back table where you can ask to receive news bulletins and action alerts.

As J. Herbert said, "organized people can always overcome organized money."

That can also happen at the local level. Every congregation has the open opportunity to initiate what is called an overture, a statement that calls the larger church to act on critical matters. Overtures are heard first, at the regional level, called the Presbytery. If approved locally, they are submitted for attention and action at the national level.

Presbyterians have worked toward reasonable, balanced gun control for 30 years, seeking a world, in the words of one General Assembly statement, where "all of our children may come to identify and value themselves and others as the precious children of the family of God that they are, and that they may come to learn peace for their lives and peace for this generation."

Now, I admit that we might hear that the PCUSA has worked for gun control for 30 years and lose any hope that this time will be any different. But I think things are different this time around.

We are presented with a moment when we can decide that things will be different. We are presented with a chance to remember – not just in our minds, but in our action – that the church began as a movement, contesting with earthly powers and principalities every bit as potent as the ones involved in the questions of our day.

We are presented with a moment in time, a moment when we should muster the courage to keep the faces of those first-graders in Newtown vividly in mind. As one of you wrote to me:

“I imagine a terrified child about the age of my own son, seeing their friends killed in the most horrific way, knowing they were about to die as well. What NRA argument would make sense to them in that moment? How might I, as a Christian, explain why I’ve let our society let this happen?”

Those are questions we should all keep in mind as we seek to administer the will of a God who came into the world as the prince of peace.

Amen.