

The Mystery Now Disclosed

Romans 16:25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you
according to my gospel
and the proclamation of Jesus Christ,
according to the revelation of the mystery
that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed,
and through the prophetic writings
is made known to all the Gentiles,
according to the command of the eternal God,
to bring about the obedience of faith —
to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ,
to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

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Romans 16:25-27

December 24, 2023 (Morning Service)

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

This morning, in the hush before the storm that is Christmas, I would like to invite you to the mystery of the front hall closet where, back behind the too many coats in too little of a space and crammed in there right next to the vacuum cleaner, we will reach *way* to the back to disclose the extra leafs rarely seen except on special occasions; because, today, we are setting a big table.

When I was a kid, we always knew something special was happening when our mother asked us to go get those table leafs from the front hall closet. With mom at one end of the dining room table and one of us boys at the other, we would unclasp the latches that held fast the table as one and, together, we would pull with all our might to create a large space. Then, we would place the extra leafs inside, aligning the holes on one leaf with the nubs on the other and push them together to transform a normally smallish to table into a rather big table large enough to seat all those who would join us as, together, as we celebrated Christmas.

II.

Christmas is a magical, mystical and mysterious time of year. When the wonders of kindness and generosity shine through the gloom and darkness of too many days, illuminating the hope which lies hidden in ours hearts such that it springs forth from us with both whispers and shouts, and is made real in words and deeds running from the faint to the profound. Though 2000 years of Advent seasons have given rise to many ways and reasons for us to celebrate, the root of each finds its home in what we might simply call “the Spirit of Christmas” which is embodied in the giving of gifts from one to another in emulation of the Christ child given by God as gift to the world; one who shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. While this certainly is good news which brings great tidings of comfort and joy, one of the very odd things which we have discovered about ourselves, and all humanity, is we find it much easier to give gifts than to receive them; some more than others.

III.

I was reminded of this Wednesday night when I drove out Route 68 to deliver this year's very last card and gift to a farm family in Lisbon. Just as I got to the turn-off to Rensselaer Falls, I pulled into Ponderosa Beef located on the right just before it. Linda had asked that I pick up some eggs and sausage (I love the garlic kielbasa) from Deb and Dave Smith, who are friends and members of our church family. As I was cashing out, Dave came over and gave me a additional carton of eggs which happening to be short one. He said, "Please take as well, we can't sell it like this." I was moving pretty fast that point, and so, without much thought, I graciously accepted the eggs and said, "Thank you!"

Then I did a *really* dumb thing, on my way back I stopped again, walked in, and gave them \$2 for the eggs (normally \$2.50). They said, "You didn't have to do that! It was meant as a gift." To which I said, "I know and I appreciate it, but I am a terrible gift receiver."

IV.

Though I certainly have not obsessed about it, the past few days I confess to finding no small amount of fault in my inability to accept their gift to me. I, of course, recognize that I am over-thinking it, but the experience led to some deep thinking which eventually became the seed out of which today's sermon might grow. Making a very educated guess, it is my hunch that many of *you*, either in-person, on the stream, or reading these words, may also suffer from the same affliction, finding it *far* easier to give than receive.

Though we all may be in the mood for a sermon that requires little from us, exhausted as we may be from all of our holiday preparations, having Christmas Eve fall on a Sunday gives us the perfect occasion to undertake some of the hardest work that the life of faith requires of us. First, I would like to share with you all the gifts that you, as a church, have *given* this year. Then, I would like to ask you to join me in striving to *receive* the gift of Christmas.

V.

At our Annual Meeting of the Congregation, always held the first Sunday in February, all that is to follow here will be specifically detailed as part of the annual report available to everyone in the congregation. For today's purposes though, we will be painting with a broader brush.

Through our church's Mission Budget and special offerings this year, our congregation has provided around \$10,000 in mission funding. Some of this was for international work through the denomination, One Great Hour Of Sharing Offering, and the Clint McCoy Feeding Center in Malawi. We fund 25% of the budget for MINC, or Ministry In The North Country; a work of our presbytery to rehab houses and help farmers in Jefferson, Lewis, Franklin, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties. As it does every year, a sizable portion of our Mission Budget went to the Church and Community Program to feed, clothe and tend to those in need here in our own community. We also supported the ministries of several small Presbyterian "sister" churches in our area, and provide funding to help fill their pulpits.

VI.

Over the past few weeks, our annual Christmas Giving Program has distributed \$7,800 in monetary gifts to 50 individuals and families primarily in and around Canton, but across the county as well; none of whom asked for any help, but all of whom were sure glad to receive it. Of this amount, \$2,000 went to families with young children, \$2,000 went to farm families, and the balance went to folks with acute need, illness, have suffered an accident or misfortune, or are just struggling hard against very strong currents. The funding for the Christmas Giving Program comes from our monthly Deacon's offering, the Farm Family Offering, and a few additional individual donations. Envelopes are hand-delivered, with either "Merry Christmas" or "Thank you for all your hard work this year" written on the inside of a church note card. Occasionally, in return, we receive a thank you note which is deeply humbling in its earnestness and gratefulness.

VII.

While the Mission and Christmas giving I just described is something our church does *every* year, this past year our church also received a substantial gift to the Pastor's Discretionary Fund in the amount of \$30,000. With this

our church has provided a cash gift to each of the 50 some people or families seeking shelter from domestic violence through Renewal House this year, is providing 50 lbs of ground beef a month for a year to the Church and Community Program's food pantry, purchasing all of the fresh fruits and vegetables for the "Bear Pack" program at Banford elementary for the 2023-2024 school year, has provided funding for an art program for kids through the Canton Free Library, has paid off dental debt, helped to provide Christmas gifts to seniors through the county's Office For The Aging, helped with college and educational expenses, supported environmental initiatives, provided emergency assistance and, finally, purchased/forgiven the medical debt of (all) 31 Canton families without health insurance.

VIII.

Together, this totals about \$47,800 in mission funding *this* year alone; or, in the language of today's sermon, gifts given. The majority of these gifts have gone to people and programs right here in Canton; but regionally, nationally, and internationally as well. Moreover, all this from a church with an operating budget of only about \$150,000. Which is nothing short of remarkable, I am sure you all would agree.

While the money and material support it provides is no doubt important, even more valuable and valued is the message and meaning these gifts represent; not only to those who receive them, but also to those who give them. To the gift receivers, "You are not alone in this world, you are remembered, there are others who care for you, deeply." To the gift givers, "Each one of us has played an important role in supporting our church and empowering it (us) to be the *means* through which such gifts might be given.

IX.

For many years now, we have used a particularly apt metaphor to describe and understand our church: that we are a "Big Tent" with room enough for *all* of God's children, regardless of political persuasion, social or economic standing, or another number of other factors that tend to divide the human family. We do not judge, we welcome. We do not make demands, we offer support. We do not grasp for easy answers, we live into the questions and abide both the unknown and unknowable. We do not focus on our scarcity, we recognize and celebrate the bounty of our blessings. And, whenever possible, we ask not what might be done for us but, rather, what we might do

unto others. Now, this year, to go along with our “Big Tent” we have set a “Big Table”; one large enough to seat all those who would join us as, together, as we celebrate not only Christmas, but our lives together each and every day of the year.

X.

While the size of our “Big Table” is exceptional this year owing to one particular “leaf” that was mysterious disclosed out of nowhere (from way back of the front hall closet, one might say) the real takeaway is the table itself; that is, our church. We are sturdy, every present, in continual use, held fast together as one, and possessing the ability to expand beyond ourselves to make room for *every* possibility; even those we once thought to be *impossible*.

Here mysteries unfold in accordance with the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Here, that which was kept secret for long ages is now disclosed in obedience to our faith. Here, the Gospel has taken root and, now, grows to offer as gifts the hope, healing and grace of the cross. Here we are a “Big Tent” under which a “Big Table” is being set to welcome all, and any who would join us. Ours is an amazing church, and serves as a gift given to our God, to our neighbors, and the larger world. Moreover, all this is a gift also offered to *us*, if we would only come to receive it.

XI.

All throughout the year we talk about the faith journey, and the rigors and challenges required in choosing to live our lives in such a way. Though there are many aspects to the discipline of faith, the most important and, seemingly, the most challenging is to simply *receive* the gift of grace that God has given through a child born in manger to be Savior of the world. That, is the *true* Spirit of Christmas; and, on a day such as this, I would encourage us all to open and enjoy the gift. Merry Christmas. Amen.