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The Event. This new show on NBC this fall presents us with a mystery. Just what is the event? This show joins with other shows that over the years have presented us with mysteries for us to figure out. Shows like *Lost*, *Flash-forward*, *Heroes* all present us with a mystery to be solved. While seeking to solve these mysteries can be fun, challenging the bottom line is that they are a game we play. On the other hand there are other mysteries which have life changing and life shaping consequences. There are medical mysteries which if we could solve them, would have a radical impact our world. Most of us have relationship mysteries in our lives, people we just can't seem to understand or get along with. If we could solve that relationship mystery our life would be a lot better and so would theirs.

There are certain mysteries that have life-changing and life shaping consequences. In God tells us about one of those mysteries in the book of Ephesians. God is in the house, please stand honor him as he speaks his word to you, *7 In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. Ephesians 1.7–10 esv* God's mystery: in the fullness of time he will unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

He will unite all things in Christ. It is another picture of God's good news. A cosmos, heaven and earth, that is been plunged into ruin on account of sin will be restored to its original harmony because of the work of Jesus Christ. Think about it in terms of the old hymn "This is My Father's World". One of the verses of that hymn goes like this: **PP This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. This is my Father's world: the battle is not done: Jesus Who died shall be satisfied, And earth and Heav'n be one.** Earth and heaven are one. The fullness, the joy, the perfection of heaven will cover the earth. NT Wright in his book "Simply Christian" writes these words, **...one day the veil we lifted; earth and heaven will be one; Jesus will be personally present, and every knee shall bow at his name; creation will be renewed; the dead will be raised; and God's New World will at last be in place, full of new prospects and possibilities.** (Page 219) God's mystery: in the fullness of time he will unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. He will re-create that which is fallen.

A wonderful picture of what will be. But what we need to realize in reading the book of Ephesians is there is more to this picture. When you read the book of Ephesians you discover that God is not waiting to begin the work of uniting all things in Christ. It is not as if he reveals this mystery and then says, "this is going to be a great day, but I guess she'll have to wait." Nothing could be further from the truth. What does become unsettling in the book of Ephesians is that uniting things in Christ in the present world becomes the work of God's people empowered by his spirit and sent on this mission into the world. Or looking at this from a couple of different angles: Angle one—learning to sing: we need to learn to sing in the present the tunes we shall sing in God's New World--and we need to sing those tunes now with hopeful voices and with gusto. Angle two: the world should be a better place because there are Christians in it, non-followers should live better because they live near Christians, societies should be better because Christians are part of them. This can be unsettling. The idea that people should live better because they live near us, the idea that we need to learn the songs of God re-created world and start singing now can leave us a bit overwhelmed.

We prefer the idea that we make our way through life doing what we want, hoping it will be good for others, but largely wanting to make sure it's good for us. We then trust that God will sort it out in the end, he will make things right, and what we do really has little impact on that. It feels a little bit like the story told about a preacher who stood before his congregation and said to

them, “The bad news is we have a huge leak in our roof. The good news is that we already have all the money we need to pay to fix it. The bad news is it’s still in your pockets.” We look around our world and we see the bad news: wars, broken families, hunger, poverty, etc. But then we hear the good news of God’s mystery, that one day everything will be united in Christ, and we heave a sigh of relief and we breathe in a bit of joy. But then God comes and says the mystery isn’t just for when Jesus returns, it is not just on that when he comes back everything will be united in him, I want to start that already, right now and you are the ones in the power of the Holy Spirit to take up the task to begin to make heaven and earth one.

We find this call throughout the book of Ephesians, but one of the most interesting places we find it is in Ephesians 2.11–22. In these verses Paul tells us how fruit the blood of Christ Jew and Gentile had informed into one new people. Those who would be reading the book of Ephesians in first century would immediately get what Paul is talking about. Here’s what’s going on: the Roman emperors saw themselves as the true rulers of the world because they’re united in their empire people from many different nations. Alexander the Great had seen himself as the true ruler of the world because he brought together Greeks and barbarians into a single Empire. Bringing people together from different nations, tribes, and languages was a way of declaring that you were Lord. In Ephesians 2 Paul shows that the work of Christ draws together the two most divided parts of humankind, Jew and Gentile. Paul writes, *For he himself is our peace, who has made two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. As Christ does this, as he draws them together he declares that he is Lord to the Roman Empire. But the drawing together is not just about some words on the page, it is about the people who have been rescued from the present evil age living together as one new people. The early church needed to demonstrate that Jesus is Lord by their life together. And as they form themselves into a new community of both Jew and Gentile they will make the world better for their neighbors.*

The early church demonstrated to the world that Jesus is Lord by their life together. They also did something else: the powers of their world want to force them to live according to the priorities of the powers, force them to live their way, to use money, sex, power according to the way the world, but the church both by its existence and its life declared that it would not live by the standards of the powerful, those who ruled, or those who declared that they were Lord. Instead they would live according to the priorities and ways of the one who created one new man out of the two.

Each one would live that way and that they would live that way together. Each one would live that way. Back to text, Ephesians 2.10, *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* We are God’s workmanship, the Greek word is “poiema”, it is used something that has been created by an artist, God the artist has created each one of us in a certain way so that we may do the works that he prepared beforehand. You are God’s work of art shaped and molded for a certain task, for certain good works that you are to walk in. As that work of art you are both to help make this world a glorious place and to remind this world that is a glorious place. And where the glory is lacking you are to enhance the beauty by your God-given gifts.

As people designed by the great craftsman God we need to remind ourselves of something we often would rather forget, namely, that sin in our lives keeps us from walking in the good works that God prepared beforehand for us. Think about this with me. The problem was sin is not only that we break God’s moral code, it is also that we miss God’s Mark for what it means to be truly human, for what it means to be who he created us to be. Indeed, as we’ve mentioned before, the

main word for sin in the New Testament, “hamartia” literally means to miss the mark is used of archers who should the target in this. The disaster of sin in our lives is that it cause us to miss opportunities to be agents of God’s new creation here and now. As one person has said, **We are called to be part of God’s new creation, called the agents of that new creation here and now. We are called to model and display the new creation in symphonies and family life, restorative justice and poetry, in holiness and service to the poor, in politics and in painting.** The disaster of sin is that it takes away the opportunities to do justice, to live with holiness, to display and model the new creation. For this reason the apostle Paul calls on us to do all we can to keep sin out of our lives. He writes to the church in Ephesus and says, ... *walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. But let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk or crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.* Ephesians 5.2-4 Keeping sin out of our lives has two sides to it. The first side is to avoid those things that can draw us into sin. The second side is to do those things that reorient our lives and our souls living is those who sing the songs of the new creation. Paul points out that this second side is caught up with embracing the life of love, forgiveness, kindness, and above all grateful worship.

A number of years ago George Gallup wrote a book based on a study he did with people who claim to be Christians. The name of this book was “The Saints Among Us”. In his book Gallup discovered that there are basically 14% of the population of America quality with him committed Saints. These are people who love more deeply, who put aside racism, are filled with mercy, and are very concerned with the needs of others, volunteer in their church and in their community making a positive impact in the world, as well as, having solid beliefs about God, the Bible, and the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Another thing about these highly committed saints—they are happier than a lot of other people. George Gallup gives us a profile of this person, **and so pure to create a profile of a fully spiritually committed person, it would likely be a 67-year-old African-American woman whose husband died within the last year or so. She is a high school diploma, and work in the service industry job making less than nine dollars an hour until she retired two years ago on only her Social Security income. To make ends meet, she works part-time as a housekeeper at a nearby hotel. At the end of the day, she’s tired, she’s experienced at least one incident of racial prejudice, her feet hurt in her back aches, and she misses her husband. But because of her deep faith, she finds the strength to go on living—not just existing, but living: with joy, determination, and peace that comes from knowing hope lies not in the things of this world, but in the promises of God in Jesus Christ. She prays and reads the Bible every day, and because of her deep faith, she finds the power to forgive the daily hurts and injustices she experiences. But when needed, she can also summon the resources of her faith and stand up for what’s right—without malice or anger.** The saints among us are not to we might think, but however they show themselves they are the kind of people that God is seeking after to be his works of art that paint the world of picture of what it will be like when heaven and earth are one.

One last thing about these highly committed Saints—Gallup discovered that they were highly engaged in their local congregation. Gallup points out that during the past 35 years, there has been a huge emphasis on deepening individual’s spiritual lives. There has been an explosion in Christian devotional books, all kind of new Bible studies and spiritual growth curricula and a whole lot more. Yet with all the emphasis on individual growth we still are not seeing the dramatic rise in the saints among us. And there is a reason for that according to Gallup. And that is spiritual commitment is the result of one big—and often overlooked—factor: Congregational engagement. That engagement means a number of different things including knowing what’s expected of you as a member of the congregation, having opportunities the work God has prepared for you to do, having people around you were committed to spiritual growth, these and other things are part of being

a person who is engaged in the life of the congregation. Gallup gives us this picture of an engaged person, **Perhaps the key characteristic of engaged members is that the church is top of mind for them. They organize their lives around their church, because it is through it that their faith has grown and deepened; they have found opportunities to serve and help others in their community; and to develop their most meaningful interpersonal relationships. They are proud of their church and can't imagine a world without it.**

Being engaged in the life of the congregation and being the person who lives the values of the day when heaven and earth are one should not really surprise us. As he saw moments ago in the book of Ephesians Paul's recipe for battling sin was not only to avoid certain things but to be a person who embraces a life of love, forgiveness, and above all grateful worship. This kind of life is lived in community. As we saw before that the people in the early church could only demonstrate Jesus as Lord when they did life together; Jew and Gentile forming one new people declaring to the emperors and the people the Empire that Jesus is Lord.

What we need to ask ourselves is how badly do we want to become people who practice singing the tunes we shall sing in God's new world, who live so the world is a better place because we as followers of Jesus within it that our neighbors have better lives because they live near us. The truth for many of us is we have not imagined that being engaged in our local congregation really shapes and forms us to the extent that Gallup discovered. We have imagined that being part of local congregation, and not just part but engaged in it, was a nice thing but certainly not necessary to become "a saints among us" kind of person. And even if that's true for other people it's not true for me. I can be a person who sings the songs of the new creation, a person who makes the world better place for all and makes it a better place for my neighbor without being engaged in the local church. And the same is true for my kids. There are other things at the top of our mind: school, job, sports, or whatever it may be. We just don't have the time in our busy lives to prioritize being engaged in church—even if all the evidence points toward that engagement making it better possible for us to sing the songs of the new creation, to be better able to carry out the work that God laid out for us from before the foundation of the world, to take up our task of making heaven and earth one.

Philip Hitchens in his book "The Rage against God" talks about how his atheism led him to faith. Something in Hitchens' book caught my attention. He was talking about how the Soviet Union set out to destroy the Christian faith. They used many methods, but one of their most effective was to demand the children join the Communist children's groups and then they scheduled their meetings on Sunday mornings so that children could not attend worship. What particularly went to my mind was that we by default have allowed a similar thing to happen to us. No one is being underhanded, sneaky, or is running a certain agenda. But slowly, as our lives get busier we find that all kind of things are scheduled on Sunday and more more on Sunday morning. After all, there just isn't any other time. One can't help but wonder what this reprioritizing of Sunday and our willingness to go along with it says about our ability to sing the songs of the new creation. Will our struggle be the same as the struggle against sin in that our new priorities will rob us of opportunities to live the ways of the new creation, to live out what it will look like when heaven and earth become one?

God has a mystery; it is a mystery with life changing and life shaping consequences. God's mystery: in the fullness of time he will unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. But while we wait God comes and says the mystery isn't just for when Jesus returns, it is not just on that when he comes back everything will be united in him, I want to start that already, right now and you are the ones in the power of the Holy Spirit to take up the task to begin to make heaven and earth one. The question is: are we willing to do what is best so that we can take up this task?