

What Does It Mean to be Stewards of the Mysteries of God?

Questions from the Floor II (fifth sermon in the series)

I Corinthians 4:1-5; September 12, 2010

Stephen R. Montgomery
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

Prayer: Amidst all the words we hear these days, O God, from ads and propaganda and slogans and sound bytes and hate, help us to hear the words of comfort from your Word. Give us ears that we might hear the good news echoing your word made flesh in the mystery of God-with-us in Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The writer had given this question some thought. “I suggest a good sermon topic could be based on I Corinthians 4:1, where Paul tells us to think of ourselves as servants of Jesus Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” He went on. “Doubtless you have preached and we have heard many sermons on the former portion of this admonition, but I can’t recall specifically a sermon treating the latter aspect. Perhaps that’s because any attempt by us to explain the mysteries of God is bound to come up short. But I think we need to be reminded that God is Holy and that we should be in awe of God and cherish his mysteries.”

That’s a sermon, and a fine one, right there. And he is right. One of the major themes you hear from this pulpit is the call to be a servant of Jesus Christ, not only by following him in your own personal life, but as a church adopting the image of servanthood in our ministry here in mid-town.

But I have to confess. When I thought of a sermon on “Stewards of the mysteries of God,” my first thought was, “Well, that’ll pack ‘em in!” Perhaps if I could only enhance the topic: “Stewards of the mysteries of God ... as they pertain to sex!”

After all, of the three primary words in that admonition, (stewards, mystery, God) two of them are anathema to Presbyterians. God we can deal with. But “stewards?” From which we get our word “stewardship?” From which we think of money, fund-raising, budgets, anxiety? From which we manage to elude the first Sunday of every November by conveniently planning to be out of town?

And “mystery?” Presbyterians are good at many things, but honoring mystery is not one of them. We prize the value we put on knowledge. Presbyterians are the only denomination that requires its pastors to study Greek and Hebrew so that we can study the Bible in its original languages. In the 19th century, more colleges were started by Presbyterians than any other denomination. Plus, today is the day that we kick off our new year in our educational ministry. You would be amazed at all the work that has gone into developing one of the most thorough and broad adult educational programs of any church I know. Ask us what we know. Don’t ask us what we don’t know!

But now, more than ever, in an age of increasingly rigid religious certainty with all of its negative consequences, now might be the time to lift up that mystery. The Jewish theologian and philosopher Martin Buber once said that the true enemy of faith is not *atheism*, the claim that there is no God—but *gnosticism*—the claim that God can be intimately known.¹ If that is true, then it's not just Presbyterians, but, according to Tom Long, so much of American popular Christianity is constantly flirting, if not sleeping, with the enemy. “From the “come to Jesus” evangelistic rallies of Billy Sunday and Billy Graham, to the overconfidence of fundamentalism to know the truth, to the Christian self-help section of Barnes and Noble, to the casual and chatty “chino and cappuccino” contemporary worship services held in some churches, to the yearning to be deeply spiritual but not religious, to the blandly re-assuring “God loves you, God believes in you” sermons that prevail in many pulpits, a too-immanent notion of God underlies much of American Christianity.

As Tom Long writes: “God is not seen as the *mysterium tremendum*, an awesome and holy presence approached in humility with eyes shielded and shoes off; God is viewed as the loquacious next-door neighbor, always in a rocker on the porch, always near, always accessible, always wanting to talk, and always eager to be *known*.”²

In that sense, we might be pretty close to Paul's situation as he was writing the Corinthians. Pagan religions in the Greco-Roman world in which Paul lived were strongly influenced by the Greek philosophers who believed that one's salvation could be gained by unlocking the secrets to mysteries; that it was our knowledge, not our faith, not God's grace, it was our knowledge that led to our salvation. These were called “Gnostics,” from which we get our word “knowledge.” And that special knowledge was received through secret ceremonies and rituals that were not divulged to outsiders, much like fraternity initiations. So when he wrote of “mysteries of God” there is a good chance that people began to perk up and listen a bit more carefully. “Is he saying that there is a kind of “salvation by esoteric knowledge” that we need? And just what is the secret to these mysteries?”

No. In the New Testament, the mysteries of God are always *open* secrets. They are the things about God and God's nature and plans and purposes that we would never have guessed just by using our human reason and intellect, or just by observing the world around us. Or just by going through some ritual. Yet we know them because God has told us about them, God has revealed them to us.

We would never have guessed from nature and history that God is love, that God loved us enough to become one of us, to bear our sins and die our death and conquer it for us in the resurrection. We would never have guessed that in the brief, apparently unsuccessful career of a Galilean carpenter-turned teacher the Kingdom of God was inaugurated on this earth and that God purposes to sum up all things in Christ. We would never have guessed that God is on the side of the oppressed and downtrodden and that the way we treat the least of these our brothers and sisters is the way we treat the one who will judge us in the end.

These are God's secrets and God has begun to open them up to us. We are to be stewards of them, to manage them for God, to get them out to everyone who should know them. And that is everybody!

Let me ask you this in light of the scapegoating of Muslims that is so prevalent in our society today. What is the difference between Christians and non-Christians? Is it that God loves Christians and doesn't love non-Christians? Beware of anyone who preaches that to you! That is not a distortion of the Gospel. It is a desertion of the Gospel! God so loved *the world* that God sent God's son.

Well then, is it that we are better morally than other people? We should be. But the early church fathers, Iraneaus, Augustine, faced the problem of the good pagan—the unbeliever who very clearly led a life morally superior to many Christians. Indeed, if we observe the crimes and inhumanities committed in the name of Christianity through the years, even up to today, we should go very slowly in boasting about some great moral superiority.

No, the difference is that we have been given glimpses of the mysteries of God. We stand in that line from Abraham on through Jesus to whom God's open secrets have been revealed.

So how can we be stewards of those mysteries? It begins with a certain amount of humility. I saw a cartoon that Jody Hunter placed up on the bulletin board by the library a few weeks ago that had a priest talking to another priest. "I figured that if I have humility, I might as well flaunt it," he said.

Yes, we know some things others don't. We know what love looks like in the flesh, we know what forgiveness and grace look like in the flesh. They look like a first century Jewish rabbi who realized that everyone he met, no matter what race, religion, nationality, or social and economic status, was indeed a child of God, and he treated them as such. When Christians see Christ empowering the weak, scorning the powerful, healing the wounded, and judging their tormentors, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work.

But Christ does not belong to us. We belong to Christ. And too many contemporary Christians feel that Christ is theirs to laud over those of different faiths. I love the old gospel hymn, but the theology is atrocious: "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is *mine*." Too many believe that because they feel they have an especially intimate relationship with God through Christ, then they are on a higher moral plain than others. Even though we know what God looks like in Jesus Christ, there is still what Thomas Merton called "the God beyond God," the God beyond the God we know. There is still "the Holy Other." And thus we need to approach all questions of faith with a certain humility and less religious certainty.

And, as the one who wrote the question said, we approach the holy with a certain awe, not with a sense that God is our "good buddy," our next door rocking chair grandfatherly neighbor, or, as Dolly Parton once said, "God is just a livin' doll!" And with the realization that, no matter how hard we try, how much we pray, how often we worship, no matter if we memorize the scriptures, we will never fully get a handle on God.

Paul wrote later in his beautiful treatise on love, though I ... understand all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, it doesn't amount to a hill of beans. I profit nothing.

So what does this mean for a church that is kicking off its Adult Christian Education program today? If God cannot be fully known, and if salvation is not dependent upon our knowledge, then why bother? Because we are called to be stewards of what we *do* know. Because truth is in order to goodness. God gave us minds, not just as ends in and of themselves, but that we might come to love God with not just our hearts and souls and strength, but with our minds. In John Calvin's wonderful phrase, "the life of the mind in the service of God," is one way to glorify God. Faith is no substitute for thinking, as William Sloane Coffin often said. "On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible. It has what we might call a limbering effect on the mind; by taking us beyond familiar ground, faith ends up giving us that much more to think about."³

I hope this comes out right, but the older I get the less I believe, but what I believe I believe more fervently and passionately than ever. That is, the more know, the more I realize how much I don't know. (You really should have called me thirty years ago when I knew it all, right after I graduated from seminary!) And what started out as certainty has now become mystery: Incarnation? Atonement? Resurrection? Trinity? I don't understand those. I have simply come to believe that the integrity of love is more important than the purity of dogma and doctrines and knowledge.

Let me share how then, I want to be a steward of the mysteries of God through a few stories.

Katie is Mary Catherine Grymes daughter. She has had cancer on and off for 15 years. Now its on again and Hospice has been called in. But through those 15 years — 15 years! — Katie would minister to others. When she would go in for chemo, she would listen to others and pray with and for them. She would bring light and joy to them, even in the midst of her suffering. How was she able to do that? I don't know. It's a mystery. But I want to be a steward of that mystery.

Bob is a businessman in Atlanta who was one of those in the business community that worked hard (and continues to work hard) to make that city a place of justice and opportunity for all people, a show place of racial harmony, going all the way back to the 60's. "Bob, how do you do it?" I asked him once.

He chuckled, a little embarrassed, and said, "All I'm doing is what the church has taught me to do." And he went on to tell me that his earliest memory there at the Central Presbyterian Church was of a little, ancient saint of the church teaching his Sunday School class a song:

*Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.
Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

"I've never forgotten that song," he said, "and I've never had any other opinion about God's love.

Now, how does that happen? That an elderly woman teaching a little ditty about Jesus stays with a boy through adulthood, through the riches of his business world, so that he is able to cast off

what society has taught him and work for peace and racial harmony. How does that happen? There is a power there, a power to change the world and I don't know how it all works. It's a mystery. But it is a mystery that I want to claim as a steward.

This past Friday we gathered with a grieving family. Lamar had lived a good, long life, but there was still sadness and grief. But we gathered together and heard the words of scripture: "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." "Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not even death." "Peace I give to you." And then we had the audacity to make the bold claim that God is able to turn darkness into light, sadness into laughter, and even death into life. I must admit I don't have the foggiest notion of how that works. I just know it to be true. Ultimately it is a mystery, and I stake my life on being a steward of that mystery.

"We see only through a mirror dimly," Paul wrote. Someday we will know, but that day is not today. There are those mysteries of God, all those wonderful things about God and God's plan for us in this world that have been, are being, or will be made plain. But many remain hidden and concealed until God's time has come to make them known.

Until then, we are stewards of these mysteries, and perhaps the best response is to tell the story of God's love, claim our servanthood to Jesus Christ, and bow down to worship in awe the one holy God.

Amen.

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¹ Martin Buber, *The Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1952), p. 175.

² Tom Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), p. 79.

³ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004). p. 8