

I Corinthians 15:51-57

Richard J. Koch

Now Comes the Mystery

April 7, 1991

Text: *"Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,..."* I Cor. 15:51

"What is wrong here?", I asked myself the first time I served communion in the nave. I mentally ran through the list of things I had to do. *"Let's see; I have to say a prayer, distribute the bread and the cup, hand out the trays, etc. Everything is in place, but something's wrong."* I continued to explore this mystery and discovered the problem I had was in the movements Mark Dunn and I were doing. Because I was new at the time, I was told to do everything he did. So I mimicked everything. Move toward the altar, lift the covers off the tray, and stand in place. No problem. But, when he turned around to face the congregation he turned to the outside. In fact, every time he turned to say some words, distribute a tray, etc. he turned to the outside. I wanted to tell him, *"I can't do that Mark! I don't know why, but I've got to turn to the inside."* But, as you could probably guess, conversation between ministers during communion is extremely limited.

Half the mystery was solved. For some unknown reason my mind refused to let my body turn to the outside when serving communion. But why? What invisible force prevented me from mimicking Mark Dunn's every move during my first communion here. I did not have an answer until last fall during one of our Jr. P.F. meetings. It was at that meeting we trained the kids on how to properly acolyte. When I say we I mean our Church Administrator Les Grube and me. Aha! The memories came flooding back. Many years ago Les taught me how to acolyte and usher too! And one thing we were to never ever do was turn to the outside when doing anything up front in the nave. The inner force blocking me was ingrained from way back. Like Pavlov's dog I was conditioned to turn toward the inside and probably will forever.

I told you this story today for two reasons. First, because I love to follow the trail of a mystery and figure out the who, what, where, and why of the unknown. Second, because there are thoughts and feelings which nag all of us on occasion, but for some mysterious reason we cannot put our finger on the cause as to why we feel afflicted. In this sermon, I will focus on the basic nagging fear of the mystery beyond death which Paul speaks of in the passage read for today.

Most Christians, it seems to me from the kinds of questions I'm asked, do not really question death. They question what lies beyond death. What new door is opened when someone dies? Will our life be better or worse than the life we have now? Will we have to pass some kind of test to get through to heaven, or is it a straight shot through the pearly gates? On and on the questions come, but alas, the mystery stays the same. Maybe the questions make life after death even more mysterious. It is time for me to attach a warning to this sermon. *"Warning: The answers you are to receive to these questions about life after death will not solve the mystery of God's ability or power to accomplish the task we so earnestly desire. These answers are fallible and God is not. These answers are based on experience. A little bit of my own experience and a lot from the pages of scripture and history which bears the story of religious men and women who really know a lot more than I do and who inspire us to hope. End of warning."*

The first thing we need to be aware of is God and God's limitless power and existence. God is beyond time and space. God does not need a watch because time is limited. It has a beginning and an end. God is infinite and therefore exists beyond time. Likewise, God does not need a room (although we often try to put God in one for our own divisive purposes). Space is limited and God is not. Therefore God is beyond the limits of space. Do not try to dwell on these things too long or you will go crazy; or so we were warned in seminary. Next, be aware of the fact that in this earthly life we live within the confines of time and space and God. All by ourselves we are limited. With God we are limitless. Mostly, be aware that God cares. God has chosen to continually break into or enter time and space in one form or another to be with us in perpetual covenant. One need only look to the covenants God made with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the people of Israel. A Christian needs only to believe in God's New Covenant In Jesus Christ and God's new revelation in the Holy Spirit. In such forms and possibly many more, God has chosen to be with, communicate with, covenant with, and care about all people and creation.

What will life be like, then, when we walk through death's door into the next life; the life in God's realm beyond time and space? Just as God cares for us by entering into our earthly realm, so we will be cared for in God's Heavenly Kingdom. Will there be a test? Is it pass fail, graded on the curve, or straight line? Remember the Apostle Paul's words, *"The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law."* William Barclay calls us to question when he asks, *"But whence comes that sense of sin? It comes from a sense of being under the law. So long as a man sees in God only the law of righteousness he must forever be the position of a criminal before the bar of God with no hope of acquittal and with the certainty of condemnation. But that is precisely what Jesus came to abolish. He came*

to tell us that God is not law, but love; that the center of God's being is not legalism but grace; that we go out, not to a judge, but to a Father who awaits His children coming home." Mostly, be aware that God cares.

On a cold crisp April morning in New England in 1963, the nuclear submarine U.S.S. Thresher slipped her 279 foot length and 3750 ton displacement of men, machinery, and hull, into the icy waters of the North Atlantic. Indeed, she was a mighty ship laden with potential. After repeated and successful test dives throughout the morning, the afternoon looked promising for a deep water dive which would test the limits of the submarine. At about two o'clock in the afternoon, the surface ship in contact with the submersed Thresher heard a brief alarm and then a "may day" and then the sickening sound of her hull breaking apart as the Thresher was going down. Down, down, down, into the mighty depths of the ocean. Down, down, down, into the relentless clutches of the sea. The Thresher's remains, now crushed by the weight of the sea, rest in more than 8500 feet of water with all hands on board. On the memorial plaque at the naval base from which the Thresher left it quotes Psalm 139. *"If I...dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."* Their memorial then goes on to say, *"These men have passed where God alone can reach them."*

It was believed in ancient times that the sea held powers so mysterious that the gods themselves could not penetrate its strength. When the Psalmist claims the God of the universe has the power to hold us no matter how far we've gone or how deep we've been in the sea, it becomes a claim which overpowers the impotent idols worshiped by other peoples.

Shall the power of sin remove us from God's grace? Shall claim of death be too great for us to be held lovingly in the palm of God's hand? No! To both questions I say no. Just a short time before his death Jesus told his followers about the eternal Kingdom waiting for them and that he would go there in advance and prepare a place for all of us. Many murmurings and questions ensued and finally Jesus said, *"I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you"* (John 14:18). Mostly, be aware that God cares and be aware that God will come to us. God came to the patriarchs of Israel to make their covenants. God came to Moses in the burning bush. God came to the prophets and called them into service. God came to the Apostles in the form of wind and fire at the first Pentecost. We do not have to conquer death by ourselves. It has been done. We do not have to understand the mystery, just believe in it and be a part of it. We do not have to be perfect, just human, and accept the hope that's been offered us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The dying words of Henry Ward Beecher were, *"Now comes the mystery!"* A life long man of God and he claimed, in his last words, to know little or nothing of God's great plan for him. What is significant is he believed in the mystery and was willing to participate in it. So many Christians suffer because they need to know the answers. They need to know how God works before they'll trust him. They won't believe in the resurrection of life until they understand the mechanics of it. This is too bad. I believe one of our biggest excuses for not believing in something is because we don't understand it.

The key to belief and a better understanding of God's infinite mystery comes in our willingness to accept, once again, the perpetual covenant being offered to us. To accept God's offering of covenant means to dwell in relationship with him who cares. Sri Ramakrishna reflects, *"So long as a bee is outside the petals of the lily, and has not tasted the sweetness of its honey, it hovers around the flower emitting its buzzing sound; but when it is inside the flower it noiselessly drinks its nectar. So long as a man quarrels and disputes about doctrines and dogmas, he has not tasted the nectar of the true faith; when he has tasted it, he becomes quiet and full of peace. When water is poured into an empty vessel, a bubbling noise ensues, but when the vessel is full, no such noise is heard. Similarly, the man who has not found God is full of vain disputations about the existence and attributes of the Godhead. But he who has seen Him silently enjoys the bliss of the Divine."* Peace comes not in knowing the answers to the mystery of God, but in knowing that we are invited to be a part of that mystery.

In Revelations 21:5 the prophet boldly proclaims the message of God, *"Behold, I make all things new."* Not just a few things or selected items or people, but all things are to be made new. That means me and you and life as a whole. We do not have to know how it is to be done; that is the mystery. We need only know and believe it will be done by God who cares and loves us. Let us have peace in our hearts. The mystery is at hand. The victory won by God is given to us. *"O Death where is thy sting? O Death where is thy victory?...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* Amen.