

NO LONGER STRANGERS: God's Powerful Love

Ephesians 3:14-21

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I.

There's something intriguing and hopeful about a message tucked safely in a bottle and tossed into the ocean. To whom might fate deliver this nautical note, assisted by the currents and wind?

Messages have been slipped into bottles for mysterious voyages at least since 310 B.C. when Greek philosopher Theophrastus tested his theory that the Atlantic flows into the Mediterranean Sea. So-called "drift bottles" are still employed as a means of charting ocean currents.ⁱ

For many reasons, people are led to cork up their words and send them out on aquatic adventures.

For some, it is rescue, like the 88 mostly teenage migrants abandoned on a boat off the coast of Costa Rica in 2005. Left on the crippled vessel by the crew smuggling them, they were adrift for three days without any means of communication. The women on board devised a plan, popping a message for help into a bottle and tying it to the end of the long fishing lines of a fishing vessel, lines that can be as long as 62 miles. After drawing in their lines, the vessel workers discovered the note, alerted their headquarters, and rescued the lost-at-sea drifters.ⁱⁱ

For some, it is goodbye, like Irish cousins Jeremiah Burke, 19, and Nora Hegarty, 18, who boarded the ill-fated Titanic in 1912 to meet up with Burke's sisters, who had settled in Boston a few years earlier. Before setting sail, Burke's mother gave him a bottle of holy water. From the Titanic, Burke wrote, "From Titanic, goodbye all, Burke of Glanmire, Cork," which he placed in the holy water bottle. The cousins died in the tragedy. A year later, the bottle washed ashore a mile from his family home, which leads one to believe Jeremiah may have thrown the bottle overboard while still in the Irish Sea, intending it to be a simple goodbye to Ireland, with no knowledge of the final goodbye to come.ⁱⁱⁱ

And for some, it is love, like lovesick Swedish Ake Viking, who took his search for love to the saltwater in 1956, long before Match.com and Tinder. A quick message, "To Someone Beautiful and Far Away," was corked in a bottle and dispatched into the ocean. Two years later, Viking's plea was answered by a Sicilian woman named Paolina. "I am not beautiful, but it seems so miraculous that this little bottle should have traveled so far and long to reach me that I must send you an answer," she replied. The two begin a correspondence that ends with Viking's move to Sicily to marry his match made by the sea.^{iv}

One pastor^v compared the Letter to the Ephesians to a message in a bottle, and there are some fair comparisons.

II.

Many Biblical scholars conclude that we don't know who this letter was written to or who authored it. It is unlike all the other letters (or epistles) attributed to the Apostle Paul in our New Testament. Usually, specific churches and leaders are named in his other letters, and particular concerns and issues are addressed. Paul will tell Phylis and Wanda to stop arguing over the color of the carpet in the Fellowship Hall and get back to the Gospel work. He'll write the church in Rome, telling them how to stay faithful under an oppressive empire, or the church in Philippi, reminding them to be steadfast in faith and full of joy.

But this letter we know as the letter to the Ephesians is different. The original manuscript does not include "in Ephesus" in chapter 1, verse 1. Although it could have been written to them, it may well have been a circular letter, a letter sent with the expectation it would be passed along and read to many churches. Some biblical scholars credit Paul with this letter. Others attribute it to one of Paul's devoted disciples because of literary style differences between this letter and letters confirmed to have been written by Paul. It was a common practice in those days for a disciple or student to write something under their teacher's name as they continued to share the message they'd been taught.

While some things are uncertain about its origin and audience, this message has arrived at our shore like a message in a bottle. It was not written to us but for us, and it still has a message that can bring us hope and truth today if we are willing to uncork it and listen to its words.

III.

Today's text from Ephesians 3 is a prayer that serves as a hinge between the first chapters of Ephesians and the last. The first three chapters are primarily about what God has lovingly done for us, and the last three chapters are about how we should live in response to that love.

As Todd preached two Sundays ago, Ephesians begins with beautiful words of what God has done by gathering up all things in Christ, adopting us as family (1:10), and continues in chapter two, as I preached last week, by proclaiming Christ broke down the dividing wall of hostility, creating one new humanity – one flock with one shepherd who is Christ. Christ, who is our peace. This letter emphatically and unashamedly declares that the heart of our loving God is to gather us all up as one people, God's people. Nothing is wasted, and no one is left out. We are one in Christ.

The world seeks to divide, to define winners and losers, those who are in and those who are out, to make us fear and demonize one another. Alan Storey, a South African minister, says that our primary sin in this world is the sin of separateness^{vi}, of believing that we are separate from one another and God and that we have no need for God or each other. But God tears down all walls that separate us from God and each other, making us one humanity. Not uniform, as there

is so much beautiful uniqueness among humanity to celebrate, but united in and around Christ as our primary identity.

I love one church's welcome statement, which includes, "We don't always agree, but we choose to walk together." vii I love that. I think that can be said of this church: We don't always agree, but we choose to walk together as siblings in Christ.

But walking together when we disagree isn't easy, and much of the New Testament is about what happens when all outsiders are freely welcomed in. It is hard, messy, confusing, and challenging, but this is where following Christ leads. This is a dominant theme throughout the New Testament, and this letter is no different.

When it is hard, we should do as the author of this message in a bottle did: We remember, we pray, and we respond. We've remembered the past two Sundays, as the writer did, what God has lovingly done for us and the family we are all a part of because of Christ. The next three Sundays, we'll talk about how we respond because of what God has lovingly done for us. But today, we pray.

We pray to acknowledge with humility and absolute wonder what only God can do, what God in God's power at work within us can accomplish, which is far more than we can ask or imagine. We pray to remain rooted and grounded in love. Let's take the message out of the bottle and listen to it again with ears to hear and a new understanding.

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (vv. 14-21)

IV.

The author is lost in the wonder of God and God's powerful love. Have you ever been lost in wonder? Maybe your breath was taken away by the love of another person, a parent, a friend, or a partner. Perhaps you've heard a piece of music that stirred the very depths of your soul. Like the nonverbal autistic boy who recently attended his first symphony concert with his grandpa. And after they played the final note, the audience heard a small voice utter, "WOW." Maybe you saw a sunset or sunrise with more color and brilliance than any human masterpiece. Perhaps it was a kind and selfless act of another that left you speechless.

As the writer prays for his friends, he is lost in wonder, not at the marvels of nature but at God's amazing grace, powerful presence, and all-encompassing love. The hope of this message in a bottle is that we, too, might experience that same wonder as we reflect on who God is and what God has done.

V.

Over 25 years ago, I volunteered with our youth ministry. I had a small group of high school girls I met with weekly. One Wednesday night during Holy Week, we met in the parlor while the choir and orchestra rehearsed the upcoming Easter musical in the sanctuary. The youth minister at the time was portraying Jesus in the musical, and that Wednesday night was a dress rehearsal.

As the five or six of us met for our Bible study, the door to the parlor opened, and Jesus walked in. Or rather, Ben, the youth minister, dressed head to toe like Jesus. But I didn't see Ben. I saw Jesus. And I'll never forget the moment and the rush of emotions that came over me, feeling like Jesus had stepped into that room and looked directly at me. I was lost in wonder at the powerful presence of this One I'd deeply loved nearly all my life – and still profoundly love to this day. I felt a rush of shame because I felt so undeserving of His grace and even being in His presence. And I was moved to tears by the all-encompassing love of God that, although I cannot comprehend its breadth and length and height and depth, it was a love that filled the room and the depths of my heart.

The writer of this letter believes that if we could begin to grasp God's greatness—if we could absorb just a splash of God's grace, a touch of God's love, a small fraction of God's power—then we would be transformed. We would be rooted and grounded in love and full of wonder. Our lives, transformed by love and grace, would become messages in bodies to a world that God longs to gather to Godself!

That moment in our parlor was like a message in a bottle that washed up on the shore of my life. But even better than a message from someone dressed up like Jesus is the real message in a bottle we receive from Jesus himself. God squeezed the fullness of God's self into Jesus' body and being and sent Jesus to be found in the world. And now that fullness of Christ dwells in you and me – this body of Christ, and the Spirit tosses us out into the world with a message of wonder at God's amazing grace and love for all.^{vii}

What message are you carrying out into the world? What message are we carrying out into the world? May it be a message that we are united in Christ, rooted and grounded in love, showing grace to all, in daily wonder at God's powerful love that can accomplish abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine. May the Spirit send us out to deliver this message of God's mercy and love for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.treehugger.com/message-in-a-bottle-striking-stories-of-letters-sent-to-sea-4864055>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2005/06/02/2003257621>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://britishtitanicsociety.com/how-to-turn-your-idea-into-a-product-and-launch-it/>

^{iv} *ibid*

^v <https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2021/08/02/sunday-july-25th-2021-a-message-in-a-bottle-a-sermon-on-ephesians-314-21/>. I'm indebted to Pastor Jonathan Shankles for the idea of the message in the bottle woven throughout this sermon.

^{vi} *ibid*

^{vii} *ibid*