

Let's talk about childbirth and race.

How's that for an introductory sentence? Let's talk childbirth and race.

I have been privileged to witness the labor and delivery of five little Hoff's. I think that makes me a little more experienced than many with the whole process. And I'll tell you, having witnessed childbirth five times I think I'm in a good position to declare: it is a painful process.

When God was explaining the ramifications of sin to Eve he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children." And I think I can safely say that God wasn't just whistling Dixie.

How am I doing for an introduction? Do I still have your attention?

Why? And what does childbirth have to do with race? And what in the world does it have to do with Epiphany and that Bible reading from Ephesians 3? Bear with me.

In my favorite chapter of the Bible (Romans 8), Paul uses this particular ramification of sin (painful childbirth) to remind us that it's not just women in labor who experience pain because of sin. Paul writes, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

Walk down the hallway of any labor and delivery unit in America and you will hear the pain of sin. Paul tells us if we slow down and pay attention, we will hear the pain of sin not just in labor and delivery units, but all over creation.

Life in a world ruined by sin hurts – sometimes incredibly so.

Take for instance, race.

It is as old as the Tower of Babel – different races, different languages, different cultures do not always play nice.

We here in America have our own history of race problems, right? From the way the Native Americans were treated, to how blacks were treated, and don't get me started on immigration, not just today, but if you study American history, as long as people have been immigrating here, race has proved to be a painful problem.

Now I'm not up here to get political on you. I'm not up here to pick a political side or tell you how you should vote. I'm up here to point out what should be an obvious truth by now: we humans have a race problem.

For some reason (I would argue because of sin), race has proven to be a painful obstacle that makes creation groan. The pages of history are full of racism.

And we, collectively through our consciences know this is wrong, that it shouldn't be this way. And so conscientious people have been trying to fix the race problem for a very long time, and certain surface symptoms have been successfully changed for certain periods of time in certain parts of the world (e.g. slavery is no longer practiced in America), but despite the best efforts of conscientious people for thousands of years, open your eyes and ears: the groaning continues.

I am convinced from the Bible that race is one of the universal groaning's of creation. The root cause of race problems (racism) is sin. One of the defining characteristics of sin: it always separates. Sin rips apart what God designed to be tougher. So, we were meant to be in a perfect relationship with God and sin rips that apart. We were also supposed to enjoy perfect relationships with each other and sin rips that apart too, along any fault lines that it can find. One of the tried and true fault lines is skin color and culture.

Racism, and the ongoing pain creation experiences because of racism are a ramification of sin, which puts it in the same category as childbirth. Which means while we can and should treat the symptoms, unless we can tackle the sin problem, the groaning will continue – just like painful childbirth will continue until sin is done away with.

And this is where, finally, we get to Epiphany and Ephesians 3.

Epiphany in general and especially Ephesians 3 have a lot to say to anyone who hears the painful groaning's of race problems and wishes there could be a solution.

As you well know, race problems are nothing unique or new to America. Racism was alive and well in Bible times too. Race problems come up a fair amount in the New Testament, including right here in Ephesians 3.

Back then the problem was Jew vs. Gentile (Gentile is just a catchall word for any one not ethnically Jewish). Now, there is a lot of history and complexity behind their problem (isn't that always the case with race problems?), but suffice it to say that from a Jewish perspective, Jews and Gentiles were like oil and water; they don't mix.

And then that guy named Paul comes along. Paul starts planting Christian churches all around the Mediterranean and in these churches he pours in some oil and water and starts shaking it up. Paul was a Jew, and when he would enter a new city he would often start at the local synagogue, trying to help fellow Jews see Jesus as the Messiah. And then invariably Paul would move beyond the synagogue and bring Gentiles into his new little Christian church.

So, in places like Ephesus, Paul came in, started a church, moved on, and left behind him a little group of Jews and Gentiles poured together in a new Christian church. Commence the groaning pain of race problems. Paul sat down to write the letter we call Ephesians in part because then, like today, race was proving a problem.

Solving those race problems was as much of a mystery back then as it was today. But the beautiful message of Epiphany that Paul unpacks in Ephesians 3 is that this problem, this race mystery may be too much for us humans to fix, but it's not too much for our God to fix.

The message of Epiphany in general is that we have a God who sees the separation sin has caused in this world and he cares. The message of Epiphany is that we have a God who hears the groaning's of a world in pain separated because of sin along fault lines like racism and wants to provide a solution.

In Ephesians 3 Paul spells out the solution with the metaphor of a mystery that is solved.

**Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you.** (God had given Paul a job for the benefit of people like the Ephesians.) **That is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit of God's holy apostles and prophets.** (Paul's point there: God hinted at and talked about a big reconciling, an undoing of the separation of sin, but the specifics of how God would accomplish that reconciliation were a mystery in generations past, until now, Paul says. Here's the mystery) **This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.**

Putting Paul's paragraph into my own words: The groaning's of sin that we can't fix, Jesus can and did; starting here with race.

That's the bottom line in verse 6. "Jews, you think that Jews and Gentiles don't mix? How's this for mixing: you are heirs together, members together, sharers together. Everything you stand to inherit as God's chosen people, they will inherit too. You aren't oil and water, you are one body," Paul says.

How? How would it be possible to overcome such a relentlessly complicated problem like racism? **"In Christ Jesus"**

The groaning of racism has been a problem since the Tower of Babel, the secret sauce, the mysterious solution: Christ Jesus.

This is the beautiful message of Epiphany that Paul unpacks in Ephesians 3. We can't fix the race problem because it is a sin problem and you and I can't get rid of sin. But God sent Jesus to fix the sin problem; which includes curing the symptoms of the sin problem, including curing the separation that sin causes.

Jesus, through Paul's letter here reminds us of the two step process to fixing divisions in general, and specifically here, racism.

Step one: Level the playing field.

God loves to level the playing field – to put us all in the same boat. Paul is a prime example of that.

Maybe you remember that before Paul was starting Christian churches and writing the New Testament he was known as Saul. Saul had taken it upon himself to try and crush Christianity. He was like a Richard Dawkins or a Stephen Hawking, who aren't content to just agree to disagree on the whole Jesus thing, they wanted to end Christianity. Only Saul was willing to take it a step further than Richard or Stephen in that he wouldn't just try and out argue and demean Christians, Saul went right to imprisoning and killing Christians.

And that history is undoubtedly what Paul had in mind when he looked back with wonder at what Jesus had done with him personally.

**"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people this grace was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."**

The Jews in Ephesus were having a hard time overcoming the race problem. The first step, Paul reminds them, is remembering that Jews and Gentiles are all in the same boat.

In essence Paul says here: "If anyone doesn't deserve to be a part of the group, it's me. My history, my past, less than the least. And if God can love me and use me and make me a part of his body, then I suppose he could love a Gentile too."

Jesus leveled the playing field for Paul. Those Gentile may have had a different history, different culture, different race, but as far as deserving to be a part of God's family, an heir of God's promises, Paul couldn't claim any superiority.

And if the race problem is going to find a solution among us, it starts here too. It starts with a humble recognition of how I am less than the least.

I don't know how many of you harbor problems with race – looking down on other people because they sound different, act different, look different. I don't know how many of you are like me, where I like to think I'm not racist, but if I'm honest with myself, neither am I all that active in pursuing justice for those who are experiencing racism – to fail to speak up and defend people who are being hurt, that's a sin too. Either way, step one is a good hard look at myself and understanding that the playing field is level, more than level because I can come up with a much longer list of my own failures than any other person I know, regardless of race.

That's step one. Sin separates, God unties us again by reminding us that we are all sinners and none of us deserve to be a part of God's group, God's body, recipients of God's promise.

Step two: Same in regards to sin, same savior.

Jesus levels the playing field and then reminds us what he did for all of us (regardless of race) on his cross.

Paul put it this way: His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

God's eternal purpose when he created this world was that we would enjoy a perfect relationship with him and with each other. Sin wrecked all of that – separating us from God; separating us from each other.

Through Jesus Christ sinners (regardless of race) would be free again to approach God with freedom and confidence (the vertical separation fixed). Through Jesus Christ sinners (regardless of race) would be free to look at fellow sinners as heirs together, members together, sharers together (the horizontal separation fixed).

Epiphany is a celebration of a God who hears the groaning's of race, sees the pain of separation and cared enough to do something about it – the prediction of Isaiah fulfilled, that nations would come to his light; those Gentile Magi, led to Jesus' feet; that his church would now (imperfectly, and in part) begin to resemble heaven, where that great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne worshiping God in freedom and confidence together.

Until we reach that heaven, the labor pains will continue, but in Jesus the mystery of sin has a solution.

God grant that the level playing field of the gospel would continue to draw us closer together and closer to our God. Amen.