

There’s something to be said for keeping it simple.

1 Corinthians 2:1–2 (NRSV) When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

2000 years ago, a working man from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, began to preach and teach and heal. The power of God was at work in him and through him. He proclaimed that the reign of God in this world was coming through all who believed in him. He showed us what that reign looks like by the way that he welcomed the people we had been taught to exclude, by the way he forgave the people we had been taught it was right to condemn, and by the way he loved the people we had been taught it was right to hate. His teaching in word and deed threatened the religious establishment. His teaching in word and deed threatened the political establishment. So “the rulers of this age ... crucified the Lord of glory.”

But the power of God was at work in Jesus; God’s love could not be, would not be contained in a crypt. God raised him from the dead, and the power that was so compelling in Jesus has now been given to everyone who believes in him. *1 Corinthians 2:9–10 (NRSV) ... , as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” — these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.*

This same power of God that was at work in Jesus is at work in us; the Holy Spirit reveals to us and through us the mystery of God.

✦ The Mystery of God

Speaking of “the mystery of God” points to what I suspect is the reason why so many resent religion today; why being “religious” is viewed negatively but being “spiritual but not religious” is much approved. To be more specific to our situation, why being “a follower of Jesus” is quite acceptable but being “Christian” or even “Presbyterian” prompts eyebrows to arch.

The critique that is made of us (said the man wearing a clerical robe with a stole emblazoned with the symbol of the Presbyterian Church USA) is that we’ve removed the mystery from God. We think we’ve got it all figured out. We think we’ve got God all figured out. We have all the answers; just ask us a question and we’ll tell you.

A religion requires a structure; certainly a structure of beliefs, doctrines and dogmas. It requires some sort of creed to define what is believed and what is not believed. And structures have a way of settling us down; here we are; here we stand. This we believe. We have solved the mystery.

Then someone or something comes along and rocks the boat. The answers that served us well for a time serve us no more. Suddenly our solution of the mystery of God is raising some uncomfortable questions. We’re on the move again, and that is uncomfortable for us.

Our response to this new situation often paints us in a negative light. These questions create uncertainty; uncertainty generates anxiety; anxiety produces fear; and the next thing you know we’re off on another holy war; a crusade for holiness and righteousness and stability! “God bless the status quo!”

We’ve come a long way from that workingman in Galilee, and I suspect it is that distance that critics of religion are rightly pointing to.

Can our structures adapt to these new questions? Can we be “the Church reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God?” Can we discern what in our structures continues to have value and what we can let go of? Can we operate with an ongoing humility that holds our answers lightly because God is always beyond us; God is out in front of us, and the story of human history, especially church history, is the story of how we are trying to catch up? Can we be spiritual and religious?

We have a lot to learn from our critics; they have much to teach us. The mystery of God is never fully solved; it is always a work in progress; we are always a work in progress. On that journey, a little humility will go a long way.

✦ Solving the Mystery of God

The mystery of God is that God isn't finished with us or with God's creation; God's work of redemption, of setting things right, of new creation is underway and ongoing. Yes, we've sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Yes, we've taken ourselves and our religious structures far too seriously. Yes, we have failed to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” and we haven't done to others as we would have done to us. All of that is true and more, and this also is true, as mysterious as it may be, God isn't finished with us or with God's creation. God still has plans for us, as God said to the prophet Jeremiah: *Jeremiah 29:11 (NRSV) For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*

God loves this world so much that God sent His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. And the Son in turn says to all who follow him: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” to make God's vision for human life and for all life as it was originally intended. And as Paul teaches us, *1 Corinthians 2:12 (NRSV) Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.*

What God calls us to do; what the Son sends us to do; the Spirit empowers us to do. We have all that we need to discern our part in God's grand design and to do it. It's not all up to us; we have a part to play, as Paul will later remind us, “now I know only in part” but with humility and love we can do our part in solving the mystery of God and making the vision of the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed in word and deed more of a reality.

We have an example of the power of visionary thinking dominating the news right now; the Sochi Olympics are underway. To be sure, our humanness has been on display; the water; the computer hacking; the concerns about terrorism. The vision is not yet complete, but it is being fulfilled in part. With all of that being said (and there has been a lot of that said about these Olympics – isn't there always something?) the guiding vision of the Olympic movement is once again a reality.

Namely, for a time, the people of the world have gathered to play games. We've come together to play. For this time, what matters isn't any of the things that we're usually so concerned about; economics, politics, power and prestige. To be sure, they are doing their best to get some attention, but the vision that is re-affirmed in every opening and closing ceremony will not be denied! The people of the world have come to play, and for a time, we catch a glimpse of what we are capable of when we live together in peace. Lo and behold, it's a lot of fun!

Living together in peace – with God, with our neighbor, with ourselves, with creation; that's the mystery of God. That's what in the world God is up to. That's why “knowing nothing but Christ and him crucified” continues to cast such a compelling vision. Imagine what we could do, the perennial problems that could be laid to rest once and for all, if we could find a way to work together with the kind of humility and self-giving love that God shows us on the cross!

There is something to be said for keeping it simple: Jesus the Christ and him crucified. What God calls us to do; what the Son sends us to do; the Spirit empowers us to do. The mystery of God is never fully solved; it is always a work in progress; we are always a work in progress; and have no doubt, God's work is in progress! What can we do here? What can we do now to live into God's vision? Imagine the possibilities and let's see where the Spirit leads! With humility and love, let's have some fun as we take our turn at solving the mystery. Amen.