

*Eph 3:2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, <sup>3</sup> that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. <sup>4</sup> In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, <sup>5</sup> which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. <sup>6</sup> 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.*

*<sup>7</sup> I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, <sup>9</sup> and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. <sup>10</sup> 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, <sup>11</sup> according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. <sup>12</sup> In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*

### **The Secret Of Jesus Revealed** (or, No Second-Class Christians)

Dear Christian Friends,

Every several years there is a news story about how there are other books of the Bible that were supposed to be included in the Bible, but were not. Sometimes they are portrayed as “lost”, or that there was some sort of plot in part of the early church to sweep these under the carpet. There is a certain appeal in the mysterious, and the conspiracy theory. So thoughts about “new” books of the Bible can be interesting even to Christians. But the fact of the matter is invariably that these books have been known for a couple thousand years, and from the beginning the Christian Church realized them as works of forgers and people with axes to grind.

Now most of you have been around the Christian block a time or two. So today, when you read on the marquee outside or in your bulletin, “The Secret of Jesus Revealed”, you are pretty sure that I am not going to tell you something shocking and new. Which is unfortunate!

Listen to some of the key words from our sermon text: Paul uses words like mystery, hidden, revealed. Paul was telling people something new. He felt it important to talk about a “mystery”, a “secret.”

Let's first back up a step. Maybe we should consider the word “mystery”. When the Bible uses “mystery”, it is used in a certain way.

Jesus would often teach in parables. Some of the disciples wanted to know more about these parables. Then Jesus said, “*The secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given to you, but not to them.*” (Mt 13:11) “Secrets” is the same word which is translated in our text as “mystery.” And as we can gather from Jesus' own words, a Biblical mystery, is something which can't be known, unless God tells us.

“The Secret of Jesus” as the marquee says, is found in verse 6. “***This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel... in Christ Jesus.***” The funny thing about mysteries is that once you know the mystery – it is not a mystery. And when the mystery is over, most of the fun is gone. You close the book. You shut off the television. No more mystery, no more interest.

Sometimes it happens to Christians. They hear the good news of the Gospel, and *it is* good news. But then it becomes yesterday's news and then old news. Jesus said, “That's what sometimes happens. People hear the Gospel. They believe. But then they get concerned about the things of this

world.” He said, “It is like Seed that fell among thorns... The seed grew, but the thorns grew quicker.” (Matthew 13:7,22). That’s what can happen when the secret becomes common knowledge.

And it can happen to a person like me. My dad was a pastor and our homes were parsonages nestled up against churches, a blessing in many ways to be sure. But I can lose interest even with the surprising and meaningful things of God’s Word. What’s that saying? “Familiarity breeds...”

Some of you have been worshipping in a WELS Lutheran church for longer than I have been alive. Not much is going to surprise you either. But it should. It is amazing that God has revealed Jesus to you as your Savior. It is better than winning the lottery to know that you are going to heaven. These things are God’s mysteries.

But what is the big secret of Jesus from today’s reading? ***“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.”***

Paul was dealing with a situation where the Old Testament had given way to the New Testament, but many people hadn’t gotten the message. In the Old Testament, God’s people were the Jews. With the completion of Jesus’ work that changed. But not all the Christians could actually get that into their heads. Many people who had grown up as Jews still had a superiority complex. (Which is understandable – not right, just understandable.) And many of the non-Jews, the Gentiles, felt like second class Christians around them. The mystery is that suddenly all were equal before God.

The world does not work this way. We humans are programmed by God to spot similarities and differences. We look at the gas prices at the different filling stations. We try to gauge how people are feeling this morning by the way they look, talk, dress. And we do all of this almost without thinking. That is how we survive.

But as with all blessings, we humans twist this ability to nefarious ends. We create blanket identities. People like us are on our side, people unlike us are on the other’s side. Societal events in our nation over the past six months highlighted this. And if we do not draw lines along lines of race, then we do it with religion or politics or education or income or gender or age or the way people talk or something else. That’s how we are. If all of us were photocopies of each other, exactly alike in every single detail, except that we had different colored shoelaces, you know what we would do? “I can’t stand those blue-shoelace people – always so stuck up and high and mighty. Those pink-shoelace people never take life seriously and we end up having to clean up the mess. But those red shoelace – there are no words for them.” And so it would go because we are sinful, full of sin.

It is amazing how insidious this is. If I have a disagreement with someone, I immediately seize on how they are NOT like me. I don’t do this consciously, it is just how humans operate. Let’s say someone jumps the line at the store. If that person is a young person, I immediately think, “That’s just the way young people are these days.” But if the person is the same age as me, I may well focus on perhaps the person is very well dressed and I think, “That’s how rich people are.” Or if they are not well dressed and I think of them as less well off than I am, “Well, what can you expect.” But the more like me, the more likely I am to think they have a good reason. I always take what I see as evil and attribute it to them being different from me. So to the extent that they are similar to me, I cannot attribute anything bad. This is not right, but this is how my sinful mind works. Dear God, forgive me and the sin that infects my thoughts, words and actions.

And here is the mystery to us humans. God says to all believers, “I love all of you. Malawian, American, Indonesian; young, old and in-between; Republican, Democrat and Libertarian; country bumpkin and city slicker; men and boys, women and girls; blue, pink and red shoelace people. I love you all in the exact same way! And here is how I love you: in Jesus who lived and died for you and all your silly yet serious sins.”

***“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, [they are] members together of one body, and [they are] sharers together in the promise.”*** That seems obvious to us who have been in the Christian faith for a lifetime. But even if you have been a Christian a long time,

this is a wonderful mystery: God does not deal with us as our sins deserve. He welcomes us into his house, and he doesn't have one room where the spiritually weak or the poor or the rebellious or the ill-tempered go. He welcomes us all into the same mansion, gives us the same rich food, hands out gifts of comparable value, gives free access to all the rooms and the spa and the swimming pool. Such generosity in Jesus Christ is a mystery we can only know because God has whispered it in our ears.

There was an employer who had some work that just needed to get done. So he was hiring employees for the day – in Africa that is called “piece work.” He went to the part of town where you can find people standing around with nothing to do. A lot of people wouldn't trust that crowd, but for some reason this guy did. He got some guys together to do some work and told them that he would pay them minimum wage for a twelve hour day. Well, they had nothing else to do, and they thought they could use a hundred bucks, so they agreed. The work was heavy, so the same employer went out a couple more times. Each time he told the workers he would pay them fairly—and they needed the cash—so they agreed. At the end of the day he paid them. The guys who had been there an hour got a hundred dollars. I would have liked to see their faces. Then guys who had been there four hours got their pay, a hundred dollars. Their faces weren't so happy. The twelve hour workers came up, and they got a hundred dollars. Well, they started a protest. They went straight up to the big man and started yelling at him. But he said, “Have I been unfair to you?” (By the way, that wasn't my story, but Jesus' in Matthew chapter 20.)

In heaven, there are going to be not a few people who have gotten in by the skin of their teeth. People who lived a life of hard-core sinning. Are you going to start a protest up there in heaven? And you will find people who were a lot more serious about their faith than you or I have ever been. When you show up on heaven's doorstep, what would you think if they were picketing you? ***“This mystery is that through the Gospel all Christians are heirs together... are members together of one body, and are sharers together in the promise.”*** God's generosity in Jesus is beyond our natural understanding. It is a mystery!

At the time of Epiphany, when those wise men find Jesus, we rejoice. It isn't that the wise men were wise, but that God showed them the way – even though he had no reason to, except for his love for all people.

Just think of what that means when you are feeling the weight of the world on your shoulders. When your job is demanding more of you than you can deliver, when the social scene at school feels like you are walking on stage before people who just want to boo you, when it seems that market forces have plotted against you and your retirement, when the bills are piling up faster than you can write out the checks, when your medical condition means that some of the good things of life are now gone forever. In all of those times you can listen to God's word of promise – the word we often choose to ignore when we have the money and strength and time to do what we want – that same word is there saying, ***“In [Christ Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence”*** (12). Amen.