

Epiphany—C
Ephesians 3:2-12
Make Known The Mystery

Sherlock Holmes seems to be all the rage these days. There is a show on PBS, another one on CBS, and at least 2 movies out recently. These shows and movies about the great detective Sherlock Holmes are popular because we enjoy a good mystery. You have to see the end to finally make sense of it all. Before then, all you have are questions and confusion. You keep asking yourself, “What did Sherlock notice that (I didn’t) or say what he said in that way?” But in the end, it all comes together and makes sense. The mystery is made known. Sometimes it is fun to watch the show again just to see how all the little clues came together.

But what if Sherlock died before the mystery was solved? What if he couldn’t figure it out? Or what if he didn’t really care to share the solution and bring justice to the criminal? It would all still be a mystery...

The Apostle Paul was a lot like Sherlock Holmes, wasn’t he? He tells us today about the special role God gave him by grace to make known the mystery of how God saved all people from sin and death.

You and I have the same role too. We’re like moviegoers. God has led us to know the mystery too. We have the script and can reread how all the pieces fit together. Today, it’s time for us to consider our personal mission in life to “*make known the mystery.*” It’s the mystery of God’s grace, and the mystery God wants all people to hear.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. The word epiphany has the meaning “to reveal” or “to show.” Epiphany is that season in the church year when God reveals some things about himself, shares with you some of his secrets. Epiphany is that time of the year when God solves some mysteries. Today, as we look at the Apostle Paul’s words in the book of Ephesians, we see God revealing things to us that we really need to know, things that are important, and yet things you’ll never figure out unless God tells you about them.

Here’s an unsolved mystery: How do you really bring people together? Isn’t it true that we live in a very divided world? What are things that divide people? Ethnic background would be an obvious one. Even in our own country, there are racial divisions. Religion is a divider too, isn’t it? There’s the false idea out there that all religions are the same—it doesn’t matter what you believe. But if that’s true, then why is religion such a divider? People of different religions separate into different groups because they believe different things. What else divides people? How about your economic situation? The rich people hang out with the rich people. The middle class people hang out with the middle class people. The poor people hang out with the poor people. Money divides people. And the list could go on and on.

The unsolved mystery: How do you really bring all these people together? And I mean truly together. For awhile, our country seemed to be united around a common goal—fighting terrorism and recovering from the attack on 9/11. But are we still united around that goal? Has that caused everyone in our country to be really and truly united, on a deep level? Everyone is putting aside their ethnic backgrounds, their religious differences, their economic situations—putting all those things aside, and really and truly coming together in a lasting way? I would say

no. Sure, we are united, but it's a shallow kind of unity. We still have things that divide us and separate us.

Churches have tried to unite people by watering down the Bible, not talking about Jesus Christ. There is a major movement among liberal churches today, to unite. It's called the ecumenical movement. And here's how it works—throw out the important things in the Bible, throw out your beliefs—things that you know are in God's Word, don't mention Jesus Christ too much, and that's how you get rid of your differences. Now we all can get together. That hasn't proven to be a very good solution. Sure, different churches are getting people together, but they no longer believe in anything. They no longer have the truth of the Gospel, the pure message of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

And so how do you solve this mystery? How do you really bring people together? The Apostle Paul tells us: *"Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation"* (2-3). God revealed to the Apostle Paul how to bring people together. *"In reading this, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ"* (4)—the mystery of Christ. So the solution to bringing people together has something to do with Jesus Christ. *"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"* (5). Do you see what this is saying here? The solution to bringing people together has always been around, but it was hard to see. But now, the Holy Spirit is working through the Word—the apostles and prophets—and here in the Word we find the solution to the mystery of Christ. Here it is: *"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"* (6).

The mystery has been solved! How do you bring Jews and Gentiles together? In the first century, these two groups of people were very, very, different, and not very fond of each other. They had different diets, different lifestyles, different everything. And yet, God was able to bring these two opposite groups of people together. How? There it is, in verse 6—through the Gospel, the promise in Christ Jesus.

You see, the Gospel removes the thing that really divides us. We have had some big snowfalls so far this year. On one occasion, we had just over a foot. Piles of snow everywhere. And snow like that keeps people from getting together. Students can't get together at school. Employees can't get together at work. Snow like that limits people in what they can do. If some of the snow is removed, that's good. But if it's all removed, then people once again can get together at schools and workplaces and restaurants and wherever else they go.

We need something removed in our lives before we can really get together. And that's our sin. You and I can't see it, but there are huge, invisible piles of sin, just like the snow, and that's what keeps people apart. Sure we have our ethnic and economic differences, but the thing that really keeps people apart are those invisible piles of sin. How do you bring people together? You can't pretend that those piles of sin aren't there! That would be like pretending that the snow isn't there. And there are people who ignore the snow and end up in the ditch. How do you get rid of those piles of sin in your life? How do you get rid of those piles of sin in the lives of the people around you? You can't really get together until that sin is gone. It's an unsolved mystery, until you realize what Jesus Christ has done for you.

Jesus is the key to solving this mystery. Jesus is the great sin-remover. The great uniter. That's why he came! There on the cross, you and I can get rid of those piles of sin in our lives.

Sermon Notes by Pastor Engel from January 6, 2013

There at the cross, dumptruck after dumptruck of sin was piled onto the shoulders of Jesus Christ, and there, he took all of our sins away. And once people realize this and believe that their sin is really gone, really forgiven because of Jesus Christ, then they can really and truly get together, no matter what their differences might be.

Our church body, the Wisconsin Synod, is part of a bigger church body, called the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference. These are churches all over the world, and we're all very different in the way we dress and talk and in the things we eat, but we all believe the same thing. We all believe that the Bible is God's Word, and that through Jesus Christ all of our sins have been taken away. A couple years ago representatives of these church bodies got together for a conference, and it was quite an event. How could it be, that these people at that conference who are so different could get along so well? They looked different, they talked different, they ate different, and yet, they were truly a united group of people. How?

Only one thing can do that, my friends, and that is the message of the Gospel—that all those piles of sin in your life have been taken away by the Lamb of God. That's the solution to the mystery—that's how you get people together—the Gospel of Jesus Christ can do that—nothing else.

That's what Mary and Joseph and the wise men from the east had in common. Mary and Joseph—not rich. The wise men—rich. Mary and Joseph—not very educated. The wise men—very educated. Mary and Joseph—Jews. The wise men—Gentiles. Very, very, different people. What brought them together? The Christchild, and what he would someday do.

This New Year, remember your privilege and role as one who can make known the mystery. You have opportunities to invite others to worship or Bible Information Class or fellowship events. It's time to stir the pot. It's time to provoke people's thoughts. It's time to pick their brains and ask about their beliefs. It's time to plant the seeds of hope and to share the secret and mystery of God's grace. The symbol of our church is not a couch or to only do what is comfortable. It's the cross. We proclaim no matter what reception we may get, or how uncomfortable or awkward it is in society to talk about personal beliefs. Now it's time to talk. It's time to spoil the ending and share God's solution to sin! Make known the mystery!

Church work isn't just for "church workers." It's for every Christian. You don't have to be an elder to reach out to the straying. You don't have to be a pastor to announce Jesus' forgiveness. Teachers aren't the only ones to nurture faith in children. Anyone can support the mission with their offerings. It's not just those on the evangelism committee who talk to people about Jesus. All it takes is a heart of faith and love to invite someone to church. All it takes is the joy from Jesus in your heart that overflows onto your tongue and hands so that you can't help but talk about your Savior and live your life as a Christian example. All of us know the secret of eternal life. All of us have the gift for mission work. We all have the privilege of making this secret the worst kept mystery. We share it by grace.

Not once does the Bible speak of a happy heathen. Not once does it mention a "decent" neighbor who has a decent life without Jesus. Not once does it speak of foreigners who worship other gods and idols as being "fine just the way they are." Not once does it mention someone who is comfortable living in sin as being a part of God's family. All the Bible knows is a people walking in darkness in need of Jesus' light. (cf. Balge)

One of the main messages of the Epiphany season is that we have a world-wide Savior—that no matter who you are, what your background, no matter how different you think you are,

Jesus is still for you. He brings you into a group of people called Christians, people who have all kinds of differences, but people who have one thing in common that binds them very closely together, and that's the most important thing of all—the forgiveness of sins in Christ. It's no longer a mystery. Today, God reveals his grace to you. Amen.