

Together Before God

Ephesians 3:2-12 (NIV)

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ 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. ⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰ 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, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

I have always known a worship service where everybody worships together, no exclusions. I'm assuming that many of you have as well. There are some churches and other religions that segregate their worship with men on one side and women on the other still to this day. What would it be like to walk into a church and see that - to not sit with your spouse or your brother or sister?

Some 2000 years ago when Christ came to earth, there was a distinct segregation of people. Those who were Jewish by blood worshiped in different areas of the temple than those who did not. Anyone who was not Jewish by blood were considered Gentiles. Most of us (if not all of us) are Gentiles. For the most part the Jews did not associate with Gentiles since most Gentiles did not live according to the commands of God; they stayed away for fear of becoming unclean by the dirty Gentiles. Those who ate turkey at Christmas stayed away from those who ate ham on Christmas because only one of those was a kosher diet commanded by God. So you can understand that there was wariness among Jews whenever a Gentile approached them.

Now imagine being one of the Magi, Gentile people most likely from Babylon. Whether it was from the prophet Daniel or another source, they had learned about the one true God, the ones that the Jews worshiped. They believed in this one God and had been looking for a star to mark the birth of his Son, the one who was the King of kings and Lord of lords. They wanted to worship their Savior, their Creator God, and their King in whom they had put their hope. Would they be allowed to do so? Would this King of the Jews accept them even though they were Gentiles from a foreign land? Would they be told that they had to wait outside, that this newborn King would not defile himself by allowing them into his presence. Would they be segregated from their God?

Maybe we can relate to this fear and trepidation if we think about moving to a new area and having to go "church shopping." For some of us, we don't even know where to start. We get to a new area and at some point ask Google where we should go to church. Maybe we ask around and see where our neighbors or coworkers go. Because our church is part of a national church body, you can search the area you are living in and find a church that at least holds to the same Bible teachings as other WELS churches do. Yet, going the first time to a new church is still a bit scary because you are wondering if you will be accepted. What's it going to be like? Will they look me up and down as I walk in without extending a hand or a smile? Are they going to make me present my birth certificate or make me take a DNA test? Will they do things differently? Will I say the wrong thing or stand or sit at the wrong time at some point during the worship service? Will they put me on the spot, make me stand up and talk? Will they force me to sit away from everyone else like in some sort of leper colony? Walking into a church for the first time can expose you to rejection and segregation just based on who you are.

A separation based on genetics, on bloodlines, seems a bit absurd to us. We've had the Civil Rights Movement. We aren't going to segregate and discriminate based on DNA. Besides, this is something that we can't control and can't change. We were born this way. You should all accept us for who we are. Because of this mindset, it's much harder to accept the truth that we are separated and segregated from God because of how we came into this world. We were conceived by sinful, imperfect parents. We inherited from them a sinful nature, passed down all the way back to Adam & Eve. We can't change this about ourselves. We came into existence with sin, with imperfection. Because God is holy and without sin, he cannot allow anything sinful or imperfect to stand in his presence. Our sin keeps us apart from God. We are segregated from God because we are sinners.

But, we can't change that. We don't have a choice in this matter. We are what we are. It's not our fault that our parents were sinful, but we have to suffer the repercussions of it? This is not fair!

Even as we cry “unfair” regarding our life beginning right away with sin, we also have to own our imperfection. We still have decisively and many times willingly sinned against God. We have broken his commands. We chose not to obey. We have to own the fact that what we have done also separates us from God. So, either way, by birth or by any single sin, we should be segregated from God, rejected. He should force us to stand outside in the cold instead of entering into his presence – both Jew and Gentile alike because we are all sinners.

But God changed that relationship. He does not segregate us from him but brings us near to him. In fact, he has always operated this way. Even in the Old Testament, the truth rang out time and time again that the nations, the Gentiles, were to be gathered with God just as the Jews were. Isaiah prophesied: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you...” (Isaiah 60:3-4a)

Never were people meant to be excluded from God. We segregated ourselves from him by our sin. That’s why he acted and sent the Christ Child. He is the one to end our segregation from God. Through his life, his perfection, his sacrifice on the cross, he brought us to himself. He gave us all the benefits of his life and so made us rich with God. He brought every single one of us to belong into the same family with the inheritance of eternal life with him. We all share in this – Jew and Gentile alike.

This is evidenced by the Magi coming and worshiping Jesus in Bethlehem. They were Gentiles. Jews should have kept their distance from them, but their worship was welcomed by Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. They were not made to stand outside of their home, enforcing the idea that Jews and Gentiles just can’t mix, that one is a better believer or more saved than another. No, God brought them to himself just as he brings us to himself. This is why Paul writes, “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 to God’s holy apostles and prophets. 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.” (verses 4-6) God does not end segregation by DNA or bloodlines or personality tests, but through the life and sacrifice of the Christ Child.

Today we celebrate the fact that Christ was born for every single one of us without exception, to end our segregation from God caused by our sin. Christ, being both God and man, paid for all our sins and so brought us to God. Now, “in him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.” (verse 12) Because of the gift of the Christ, we never have to be nervous wondering if God will exclude me or push me away. I can approach him with the same freedom and confidence as the Magi did, knowing that he welcomes me. My confidence and freedom are placed in Christ, not myself, not my works, not my actions, not my skin color, not my DNA.

It is with the gift of the Christ Child in mind that we look at other people. When someone new enters our church, we know what God has done for them. We know that he has taken away their sins so that they are not to be segregated from God. No matter who they are, no matter what they have done, no matter what they look like, they are welcomed by God. They come before God on the same terms we do: Jesus’ blood and righteousness. Christ ends our segregation from God.

Today and every day we approach God in freedom – freedom from our sins – and confidence, confidence knowing that Jesus is the reason that I can come before God and never be rejected, never be segregated from him. Through the gift of the Christ, we are accepted by God, embraced by him. This is why the Magi came to worship him. This is the mystery that God made clear through the apostles like Paul and prophets like Isaiah. We are heirs together with all who have faith in Christ Jesus as their Lord. We are all members together of that one body in Christ. We are all sharers together in the promise of eternal life in heaven through Christ. With faith in Christ, we are all together with God. Amen.