

**“Aha Moments”**

*“In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ...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” (Ephesians 3:4-6).*

Teachers refer to it as an “Aha Moment.” It’s the experience a student has when he or she finally comprehends a new idea; when things click in their brains; when the light bulb of understanding comes on and a student “gets it.” Teachers live for “Aha Moments.” In fact, for many teachers, experiencing an “Aha Moment” now and then is the only thing that keeps them in such a demanding profession.

The thrill of discovery is one of the great joys of life, and today in the life of the Church, we are marking one of the greatest, “Aha Moments” in history. Today, we celebrate Epiphany and Epiphany is all about discovery. It is about the revelation brought by the visiting Magi, and spoken about in today’s text from Ephesians, that Jesus was born not only to deliver the people of Israel, but that He has come as the Savior of the entire world.

This may not seem like a big deal to us today, but believe me, this message was utterly shocking to the New Testament Jews. For generations they had waited for the promised Messiah as the One who would “restore the Kingdom of Israel” (Acts 1:6). The entire Jewish religious culture was built around rights and rituals exclusive to the Jews, and, as we witnessed in the many debates Jesus had with the Pharisees, they fervently believed that their status as children of Abraham set them apart as God’s chosen people (John 8:33-59). In fact, in the years following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Jewish establishment dominated the Church and even in many of the early Christian congregations, Gentile believers were considered second-class citizens...and no one would have understood this better than the Apostle Paul.

Prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul was himself a Pharisee steeped in Jewish tradition and in his letter to the church at Philippi he described himself as a model Jew. Paul wrote, “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (Philippians 3:4-6). Like many of his day Paul believed the salvation promised in the coming of the Christ was exclusive and strictly reserved for the Jewish nation.

The revelation that Jesus Christ came to save all people would have been a shocking discovery to Paul, and his surprise is clearly heard in today’s Epistle reading from Ephesians. In this reading, we find Paul trying to express his own personal, “Aha Moment” as he writes, “In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ...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” (Ephesians 3:4-6).

For us who were brought to faith in a day where God’s love for people of all nations is a basic tenant of Christianity, it seems odd to make such a big deal about the “Aha Moment” of Epiphany. The fact that almost none of us here today can claim Jewish ancestry is probably not an issue we’ve ever even considered, and it’s certainly not an issue that’s kept us up at night. We’ve grown up with an understanding of the universal nature of the Gospel. Many of us can remember singing songs like, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” For us Gentile Christians, this message is almost second-nature and if anybody should grasp the truth that the Gospel of Christ is for all people it’s us...but our issue is not one of comprehension. We understand, “the mystery of Christ for all people” that Paul refers to in Ephesians just fine. The problem is...we don’t live it. We sing hymns that refer to mission work. We pray as a congregation that the church would extend the message of the Gospel into the unbelieving world. But when it comes to personally sharing our faith with others, we fold up. We shy away from the bold language of our hymns and prayers and we timidly put the Gospel on the shelf for another week.

Paul's message in today's text, and "the mystery of Christ" about which he speaks, is the inclusive and universal message that Jesus Christ entered our humanity, lived a perfect life under the Law, died on a cross for the sins of the entire world and was raised from the dead, conquering death and giving all of humankind the certain promise of everlasting life. This is the Gospel! This is the "mystery of Christ!" And this is the "Aha Moment" that the Church has been commissioned to communicate! All the things we do as a church – the social gatherings; the weddings and funerals; the festive holiday services; Christian education; outreach to the neighborhood – all of these things should serve to accomplish the job that God has given us to make known the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, God's "intent was that now, through the church the manifold wisdom of God *should be made known*" (Ephesians 3:10).

As the Church, we are God's mouthpiece and, through our proclamation, God is delivering His life-saving Gospel to the world, and yet, so often, we shrink from the task. We compartmentalize our faith, pulling it out only when it's convenient and, in our reluctance to bear witness, countless chances to share Christ are never realized. Instead of looking to connect with new people, we resist relationships with anyone who takes us out of our normal social structure and Gospel opportunities that that Holy Spirit may have opened up are lost. We are naturally inclined to take the easy path. We live near people who look like us, we socialize with people who think like we do and we resist opportunities to connect with people who may challenge our comfort level.

In our desire for a neat, tidy spiritual life, we have become like the Jewish Pharisees who took pride in their outward religious expression while completely missing the change of heart Christ came to bring. And what did Paul have to say about the place of outward religious appearance? Writing from prison, Paul said, "whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ" (Philippians 3:7-9).

God's priority is always people over pageantry. God's attention is always on the status of the heart rather, than the actions of the flesh. God's focus is always on the sick and brokenhearted, rather than the proud and well-fed. And God's most pressing desire is to save sinners like us!

The greatest "Aha Moment" of all comes from the epiphany that in Jesus Christ we are made righteous. That for us comfort-loving and self-centered people; for us, who would gladly run from God and turn back to our corrupt way of life; for us sinners, God's Son would come to earth. For us sinners, He would set aside His divine nature. For us sinners, He would take on human flesh. For us sinners, the creator of all things would submit Himself to hunger and loneliness and sorrow and pain. For us sinners, He would walk in our shoes and carry our burdens and die the death we deserved...and for sinners like us He would rise from the grave.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our lives have been redeemed, we have been forgiven and we have been freed from self-consciousness and the paralyzing effects of sin that have kept us from God and from each other. In today's text Paul writes that, "In (Christ) and through faith in Him we may (now) approach God with freedom and confidence." The mystery of the Gospel is that in Christ and through faith in Him we may now live lives that sing out Christ's work on our behalf; and the mystery also is that in Christ and through faith in Him we may approach people who don't look or think like we do; and that in Christ and through faith in Him we may open the door to relationships that take us out of our comfort zone; and that in Christ and through faith in Him we may proclaim the universal and unconditional Gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of all people.

Epiphany means that in Christ and through faith in Him, we can share God's love and forgiveness with the people God brings into our lives. And as we bear witness to what God has given us in His Son, the Holy Spirit will work, hearts will be changed, and we will see the "Aha Moments" unfold right before our very eyes. Go in the peace of His righteousness and share this epiphany. Amen.

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