

*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. (Ephesians 3:2-12)*

### **This is God's Vision**

What is our vision? If you read anything about leadership in a church or a school or a business, sooner or later the question of vision comes up. In the church, leaders are supposed to help a congregation uncover their vision and they're supposed to announce that vision and make sure the congregation makes decisions that work toward that vision. I'm not talking about a formal vision or mission statement as much as making sure we know what we're trying to do and that we work toward it. What are we going to do here at Peace with the gospel? How we answer that question is our vision. And it's a little piece of a much bigger plan that God put in motion when Adam and Eve fell into sin and he promised them a Savior. St. Paul reminds us today that God has a vision for his Church. We want to remember God's vision as we decide, in the freedom God gives us, how we will strive to do his work.

#### **I.**

**This is God's vision: a Church that includes everyone.** Now, that seems pretty obvious. But it wasn't when Paul wrote these words. Most people that Paul encountered knew nothing about his God and they generally thought that there were lots of gods out there. In fact, every ethnic group had its own. So the idea of a religion that the one God intended for all people was a pretty revolutionary. Of course, the Jewish people knew the one true God. But until Jesus came, God focused his work almost entirely on them. Most Jewish people assumed that God wasn't interested in the gentiles. Now, they were wrong about that. The Old Testament has many prophecies that speak of the gospel going to the ends of the earth and of the gentiles worshipping God. But even after the day of Pentecost, that insight was lost even on most Christian Jews. The biggest struggle for the first generation of Christians was how to integrate gentiles into a church that was majority Jewish.

God appointed Paul to change that. Paul speaks of his work as revealing a mystery. What mystery? Paul says, "**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.**" One Christian Church that includes all people on earth. That's the mystery. God chose Paul to be the leading edge of that work. And it was an odd choice. Paul calls himself "**the least of all God's people.**" That wasn't false modesty. The other apostles knew Jesus personally. They saw his miracles and heard him preach. They saw and touched his resurrected body and watched him ascend into heaven. Paul wasn't there for any of those things. But it's worse than that. Paul actively attacked Christians, throwing them in prison and "breathing out murderous threats." He did everything he could to stamp out their faith. He never forgot that history.

Today, the Christian Church doesn't look like the church Paul served. It's more than just majority gentile. Christians of Jewish descent are so rare in the visible church today that it's remarkable when you meet one. That's a testimony to the success of God's plan. Today only about one in 500 people in the world is ethnically Jewish. Christianity couldn't stay a majority Jewish faith. God wanted the whole world to know Christ. So Jesus sent his Jewish disciples out to tell the world. That plan isn't done yet. There are still billions

of gentiles who don't know their Savior. Many other religions are growing faster than Christianity is – must faster than Lutheranism is. For far too long, the Christian Church on earth has relied on raising Christian children as our primary means of growth. Now, I absolutely want every one of our children to be Christians. But if we only reach out to our own kids, who's going to reach the kids of unbelievers?

God's vision is very clear: we are heirs together with Israel. We are members together of one body. We are sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. Did you hear Paul say "together" three times? God doesn't care about our ethnic divisions, whether they're Jewish-Christian or white-black or western vs. Arab. God wants all people to know Christ. God's vision is for one universal body of Christ that shares Jesus' promises of love and forgiveness and eternal life. That's a spiritual reality, to be sure. But God's vision is for all people to inherit heaven. That vision is what brought you and me to faith. God sent the gospel message out through Paul and all the men who worked with him and after him. God spread that message to Europe and Africa and Asia and eventually to America. God raised up guys like Martin Luther to remind us what the message is. When the time was right, God baptized and spoke that gospel to you and me. He reached into our hearts and gave us faith. We are now heirs of eternal life together with every Christian who has ever lived.

God's vision is for everyone out there to join us who are in here. Is that our vision? If not, why not? I don't believe that our problem here at Peace is racism. I don't believe that we're unwilling to welcome people who are different from us. But I do question whether we really believe that we have something to offer here at Peace. Our attendance has been slowly dropping for almost ten years. In the last two years, the average has dropped below two hundred a week for the first time in decades. Are we content with a slowly shrinking church? I don't think so. But do we know what to do about it? It has to begin with recognizing God's vision for the Church is for every congregation to be hearing the gospel for their own comfort and faith and then sharing that gospel, inside and outside the church. Outreach is not our only job. Encouraging each other, building each other up, teaching our children – those are core pieces of God's vision. But actively, joyfully, constantly holding Christ out to the world around us is also a core piece of God's vision for the church.

It's just too easy for us to find excuses not to be active in that part of God's vision. When was the last time you personally spoke about Jesus to anyone? When was the last time you rejoiced to be a part of this congregation and gave thanks to God that you hear the gospel in this place? We're all sinners. It's easy to be negative about the congregation God has given us. It's easy to despair about our shrinking congregation and at the same time, to think it's someone else's job to do something about it. We can all say, "I don't have the time or the expertise or the gifts to do it." But God put you and me here. He promises to work through the gospel. He controlled all of history so that we know Christ and we belong to this congregation at this point in our personal history. How can we fail to rejoice in his love? It's a sinful attitude that refuses to acknowledge his grace in gathering us here.

But you know what? Jesus even died for bad attitudes among Christians who should know better. Jesus even died for us when we fail to rejoice in what he has given us here. Jesus' blood washes away all the times we've been content with our shrinking church and unwilling to be a part of changing it. Jesus still loves us just as much as he did when he gathered us here. He is still taking us home to heaven. He calls us to do all that we can with the gospel here, today. And tomorrow wherever he places you. And every day until he calls you home. Trust in his promises. Rejoice in his love. Be a part of God's vision of reaching out to the whole world with the good news about Jesus.

## II.

It's not about institutional preservation and keeping the jobs of our called workers. It's not even about the numbers, although we'd be fools if we didn't take note of our numbers and ask ourselves hard questions about them. It's about doing all that we can with the gospel in the time and place that God has called us to live. If we are faithful in proclaiming that message, here in this sanctuary and in our school and also in our community and throughout the world, then if the numbers continue to go down, we have nothing to be ashamed of. Jesus said that in the last times, the love of most would grow cold. But let's make sure that we are proclaiming that good news about Jesus and not just inside this building. Through that message, God makes us poor sinners rich. **This is God's vision: a Church that has unsearchable riches in Christ.**

Paul speaks today of "**the manifold wisdom**" of God. What does that mean? It might be easier to understand if we translated the Greek as "the many sided wisdom of God." What God has done for us has so many sides that I can't even summarize it all in the time that I have left this morning. But all God's plans lead

to Christ, the Son of God, who took on flesh to save us. That God-man stood in our place. There was never a better member of a church than Jesus was. If anyone ever had reason to be negative about the visible church that he belonged to, it was Jesus. His church was run by self-serving, power hungry unbelievers who rejected everything he had to say. Still Jesus faithfully worked within that church because he wasn't serving that leadership. He was serving the Lord.

Jesus did that for us. So now, when God looks at us, he doesn't see how defeatist we can be. He doesn't see how unfaithful we have been. He sees Jesus being the perfect member in our place. He calls us perfect. He sees Jesus laying down own his life on the cross to pay for every Christian who ever made excuses for his shrinking congregation or who ever figured it was somebody else's job to solve the problems. He sees Jesus offering his own blood as the payment for all the sin and unbelief of all the world. That blood paid for every single person who will ever live. So God counts us all as paid for. He sees Jesus rising and paving the way to heaven for us, so he opens the door to life when we die. He promises that Jesus will return to raise us and remake our world.

That's the treasure God has given us. We will spend eternity pondering it. Paul says: **“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, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** “The rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” are the angels. God's vision is that the angels in heaven would wonder at what he did for us. As we go about our work, as we build each other up and comfort one another, as we study together and teach our children to know the Lord and as we reach out and bring people that good news, the angels in heaven see why the Son of God left his throne in heaven to die. They see God every day! They look Jesus in the face! Still they need to see what God is really doing to understand it all. So do we! The great thing is, we do experience it day after day while we live here.

God's vision makes us rich because it gives us eternal life and because it gives us purpose in this life. Who wouldn't want that? People today feel lost. They're trapped in guilt and fear. They're frustrated because they pile up new phones and gadgets, they buy cars and houses, they work more and more hours and accumulate more and more debt, and for what? They don't know where their lives are going. They feel guilty because they can't spend enough time with their kids. They cheat themselves by enslaving themselves to work. To what end?

Without Jesus, life has no meaning. We have the answer. We have the treasure. God's vision is that we give it to them. God's vision is that we love the people around us enough to share our joy with them. That will only happen when we have the joy ourselves. The joy of this life is to know Christ. The promise of this life is that Jesus walks with us and hears our prayers and does all things for our good – sometimes sending challenges, sometimes raining blessings down on our heads. Then he brings us home to heaven. You and I have that treasure. God's vision is that we share that treasure with the whole world. My friends, let's be a part of that vision! Let's leave behind the malaise of the last ten years and recognize what a gift we have in the gospel here, and in our brothers and sisters in Christ here. Let's choose to rejoice and to share that joy with each other and the world. There are an infinite number of ways we can do that, and we need to carefully choose how we will do it here. We need a clear vision and we're going to work together to make sure we have one. But let's do all that we can with the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.