

Gentiles

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Ephesians 3:1-12

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul highlights the unexpected surprise at the heart of the Good News about God redeeming all creation: that through Jesus Christ, God has united Gentiles with Jews as one people of God.

Because of this, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ for the sake of you Gentiles — certainly you've heard about the responsibility for God's grace that was given to me for you, that the once-hidden truth was made known to me by revelation, as I have already written in a few words, which you can read in order to understand my insight into the once-hidden truth about Christ, which in other generations wasn't made known to human beings, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles share the inheritance, share in the body, and share possession of the promise in Christ Jesus, through the Gospel, of which I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me, according to his powerful working.

This grace was given to me, less than the least of all the holy ones, that the good news about the incomprehensible riches of Christ, would be brought to the Gentiles and the plan concerning the truth which was hidden away from past ages in God, who created everything, would come to light, so that the multi-faceted wisdom of God would now be made known to rulers and authorities in heavenly places through the church, according to the age-old design, which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access, through his faithfulness.

Children's Story

From one end of the farm to the other, it was time to pick vegetables. So first thing in the morning, the farmer started her pickup truck, drove to town, and gave jobs to everyone she saw. She said, "Work for me today, and I'll pay you fifty dollars."

Later that morning, she drove back to town and hired more people to pick vegetables. She said, "Work for me for the rest of the day, and I'll pay you what's right."

That afternoon, the farmer drove to town a third time and hired still more people. She said, "Work for me for the rest of the day, and I'll pay you what's right."

Later still, not long before sunset, she drove to town for the fourth time and hired more people to pick vegetables.

By the time it was dark, all the vegetables had been picked. The farmer began to pay the people who had worked for her.

She started with the people she hired last and ended with the people she hired first. She paid each one of them fifty dollars.

Imagine that! The people who worked only for a little while were paid the same as the people who worked all day. That sure was a surprise!

Sermon

Every job, I suppose, has its occupational hazards. We ministers, for example, sometimes get excited about theological ideas. Our skin tingles when we see something — something we've stared at blindly for years — for the first time, something surprising, something heart-warming, something mind-bending even, in the Gospel. And, of course, we can't wait to let other people know. We want to share, we have to

share our discovery! The trouble is, most people don't really care. It's not that they don't love Jesus or love the Gospel. It's just that other things make their skin tingle. It's a minister's occupational hazard to forget this.

I'm guessing that most of us feel the same way when it comes to the Apostle Paul. Paul was given an insight about Gentiles and Jews in Christ. This insight was an energizing force in his ministry, in his life. He wrote about it often as a critical centerpiece of the Gospel. Well, I don't know what that insight did for people in the first century, but I think most of us in the twenty-first century just yawn. We don't share Paul's skin-tingling excitement about Jew and Gentile in Christ. I wonder if there's a way we could.

Perhaps a little context is in order. It really wasn't a surprise that Magi would visit baby Jesus. Anyone in Israel who had paid attention to the prophets would have expected as much. Gentiles come and bow down before the King of the Jews? Could it be any other way?

Jews, for as long as anyone could remember, had been aloof from Gentiles. It was how their sacred texts told them to divide the world. Like so many other peoples, they divided the world into "us" and "them." The patriarch in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* says, "There are two kinds of people: Greeks and people who wish they were Greeks." My mother's Armenian family divided the world in much the same way. There were Armenians and there were *odars* — everybody else.

For the Jewish people, this type of "us" and "them" division was more than cultural. It was ordered by God. It was a matter of survival, not just as a people, but as a chosen people. God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob was their father, no one else's. So there was to be no intermixing, and certainly no intermarriage, with Gentiles.

Now, they succumbed to that temptation in Canaan, and they paid the price for it in exile. But they learned their lesson, learned it well, so well, in fact, that the prophet Jeremiah had to exhort them in Babylon to get on with life, to mix it up with the natives, instead of hunkering down in the seventh century B.C. equivalent of a panic room waiting to be rescued. When deliverance came and they returned to the Holy Land, they forgot the lesson for a time. But soon they sent away their non-Jewish wives and renewed their historical aloofness, an aloofness that remained into the first century.

Yet for all the aloofness, there remained an expectation: Gentiles would come, one day. Gentiles would come and their kings would bow down before Israel's God and before his chosen people. So the humble visit of the Magi was no surprise at all.

But Paul was the instrument and witness of a great surprise. Yes, Gentiles were coming to Israel's God. They were bowing down before Israel's king, God's chosen One, Jesus. They came in humility. They came in penitence. They came ready to change their ways. But they did not bow down to Israel. They did not humble themselves before the Jewish people. Through Christ, they themselves (Gentiles!) became children of Abraham — and not by first becoming Jews, not by keeping the Law of Moses, but by the Spirit and by faith.

Here's what Paul perceived, this was his insight, what made his skin tingle: "Gentiles share the inheritance [with Israel], [Gentiles] share in the body [with Israel], and [Gentiles] share possession of the promise [with Israel]." In Christ, Gentiles are children of Abraham, too. This is not what anyone had expected. This is not what anyone was prepared for. Jews and Gentiles, brothers and sisters in Christ!?! That's what made Paul's skin tingle.

And that's what makes us yawn. Face it, it's a tension we don't feel. It's old news about something accomplished long ago. We Gentiles have been part of the family for more years than the family was Jews-only. We have been invoking the promises made to Abraham over our children for centuries. We'll do it again in a few minutes, when Emma and Paul are baptized. It's old news, and old news makes us yawn.

Besides, Paul's skin-tingling insight hasn't worked out as he imagined. Jews and Gentiles are hardly one in Christ — not yet, and there's no sign of it either. We long ago went our separate ways. This actually was already a huge disappointment for Paul himself. He agonized over it. He wrestled with it theologically. He tried to make sense of it. Chapters 9-11 of his letter to the Romans reflect both his grief over this issue and his hopes. So that great, one-big-happy-family unity remains theoretical at best. And theoretical makes us yawn. It takes progress and results to make our skin tingle.

Well, as important as the question of Jew and Gentile in Christ is — and it is important, and it will one day be resolved — as important as that question is, I think we need to set it aside and consider for a moment a parallel question. It seems to me that we today, and for most of our history, are nearer to the Jews in Paul's picture than we are to the Gentiles. We are more likely to be exclusive than to be excluded. We are more likely to be aloof than to be hospitable. We are more likely to be a superior than to be a partner. The question is this: If we today are, in effect, the Jews in Paul's picture, then who today are the Gentiles? Who today are the Gentiles? A number of candidates come to mind.

How about young children? They are baptized. They are sealed as members of the covenant family. They are standing in line with the rest of us to inherit the promises made to Abraham. Yet in the Christian Reformed Church, young children remain officially excluded from the Lord's Table. I am so grateful that we welcome young children to the Table here. But I wonder: How else do we keep young children at a distance?

Who today are the Gentiles? How about Pentecostal Christians. Pentecostal Christians are the most potent (human) force for Christ in the world today, especially in the developing world. But we have our doubts and our fears about these Christians. We are more likely to write study reports about these Christians — like the thick ones presented to Synod last summer — than we are to open our arms to them.

Who today are the Gentiles? How about gay and lesbian Christians? We can and do argue about certain behaviors, and we have taken positions about those behaviors. That's well and good. But do we hear and do we see that Christ is calling these Christians, too? Do we embrace them as our brothers and sisters, as one family?

Who today are the Gentiles? It could be anyone who makes us uncomfortable, anyone we would have a hard time welcoming, anyone we would have a hard time showing hospitality to, anyone whose Christian credentials — anyone whose baptism is not enough for us. There are many candidates today to fill the role of the "Gentiles."

Now, here's a critical point, both in the first century and in the twenty-first century. What made Paul's skin tingle was this. The Holy Spirit was at work. The Spirit was doing the unexpected. The Spirit was changing the rules of the game. The Spirit was redefining the family of God. All that Paul and the church, both Jews and Gentiles, needed to do was to recognize what the Spirit was doing, to rejoice over what the Spirit was doing, and to welcome every brother and sister to the family.

The first century Jew-Gentile question may make us yawn, but there are plenty of twenty-first century Gentiles around. If only we recognize what the Spirit is doing, then we'll all have something to rejoice over, and our skin just may tingle as we welcome all of our brothers and sisters — and they, too, welcome us — to the family.