

Sermon: Our Great Inheritance
All Saints Day, Year C (Feast transferred)
Ephesians 1:11-23

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“In Christ we have obtained an inheritance.”

What have you inherited? Maybe your grandparents’ china has made its way onto your dining room table or your mother’s couch now resides in your living room. Maybe you inherited your father’s nose or his outrageous laugh. Maybe you inherited something you didn’t really want, like a tendency toward depression or alcoholism. It’s common to consider our inheritance in terms of financial gain or biological traits.

Today on All Saints Sunday we focus on our inheritance of a higher order: the inheritance we have obtained in Christ. While in our ordinary thoughts about inheritance we think about family members who have left something to us or someone we will leave something to when we die, our inheritance in Christ is something that is both *across* time and *in* time. Because Christ is present in the here and now, was present from the beginning of time and *will be* present in what we consider our future. All Saints is a major feast day of the church that celebrates not only those saints who have come before us or the ones even with us on earth right now, but celebrates that Christ has been with us all along! All Saints is a time when we recognize that all are one in Christ. And we are reminded there is a very thin veil between those who have died and gone on to the Greater Life in God and us, who are still on earth. There is a very thin veil between us and the heavenly realm. We are reminded that we are part of something much greater than ourselves.

There is a story of a young English preacher who served a very small congregation. It was his custom to administer communion at the end of the evening services to anyone who remained at the conclusion of the service. One night so few stayed that he wondered whether or not he should even share communion, but he decided to go ahead. When he got to the part in the prayer that says, “Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name,” he read it again, “With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.” Then he prayed, “God, forgive me. I did not realize I was in such company.”ⁱ

We are in such company! This story points out, of course, the great cloud of witnesses, the angelic and heavenly beings and all those who’ve gone on before us, who are in our midst all the time but whom most of us do not visually see. The spiritual realm and the earthly realm are not so far apart. And if we see with the “eyes of our heart,” to use one of Paul’s phrases, we see that we are unified in Christ.

There is another story that points out the nature of community in Christ, the body of Christ, of which you and I are a part. “An old Hasidic tale tells of a disciple who asked his rabbi the meaning of community one evening when they were all sitting around a fire. The rabbi sat in silence while the fire died down to a pile of glowing coals. Then he got up and took one coal out from the pile and set it apart on a stone hearth. Its fire and warmth soon died out.”ⁱⁱ

This story has many implications but today it could remind us of our inheritance in Christ and our need to respond to God’s invitation to draw near, and it can also remind us of our need to

draw near to one another. We have been given the gift in Christ of community. And even though sometimes community can become divided and get things drastically wrong, our life in Christ transcends division and even transcends those mistakes. (Which is a very good thing as election day looms around the corner) You could say Christ's love saves us from ourselves. Our salvation is dependent upon Christ's profound, constant forgiving and loving presence. And the Church, which is Christ's body, is the living manifestation of unity in God. Again, we must remember we are small but significant part of something greater than ourselves.

The inheritance that we have in Christ is that we are one with Christ and with each other, even when we disagree or have divisions. Paul, the possible writer of Ephesians, calls his audience to come to know Christ, "so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints..." Paul himself was dealing with the primary division in the young and fledgling church between Jews and Gentiles. He was trying to bring the church at Ephesus to unity.

Most of us don't really need reminding of divisions in our world today. While perhaps we don't have many divisions within this particular church, thank the good Lord, we certainly feel them, see them, experience them in our wider world. Paul reminds us that the unity in Christ transcends all divisions, all differences, all separations. He writes, "(Christ) has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is the body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."(v.23)

One area of Emmanuel's life that speaks to unity with God's creatures is in our Know Your Neighbor, a.k.a. KYN interfaith gatherings. While we recognize distinct differences between our Jewish, Muslim and Christian friends, our wanting to be in community with them is one way of our recognizing the oneness of God. We see God's image face to face in each person who shows up at those gatherings, no matter what their belief or lack of belief. We will have this opportunity next Sunday at the next gathering. At a national church level, a current effort toward unity is in a series of talks with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Again, while recognizing the differences in denominations, an effort is being made to bring us into closer union.

This week, can you consider ways in which you might consider your inheritance in Christ? How can that inheritance of Christ's light and love in your life help you transcend differences and be in unity with those you might have written off? Pray that God will show you how you might share that great gift.

Today after the Eucharistic prayer, we will emphasize our unity in Christ by gathering in a big circle and giving the bread and wine to one another. I will give you instruction right before we share. We will leave the circle incomplete with the altar accessible, reminding us that the great cloud of witnesses, angels, archangels and all the company of heaven, are with us in this great celebration of unity. Christ is with us now, always was, and always will be. Praise be to God!

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4, p.231, by Robert Dunham.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p.233