

“Inheritance of the Saints” GPPC 11-6-16
Psalm 149, Ephesians 1:11-23

How many of you have ever been to the reading of a will? I’ve never done that, but some of you have.

Of course, you see “the reading of the will” scenes in the movies, especially comedies. “I, Thaddeus Franklin Stevens, being of sound mind and body, hereby bequeath the following: to Joseph, my beloved, favorite son, one million dollars. To my other scoundrel son, Judas, I leave 50 cents. And to my loyal housekeeper and only true friend, Susan, goes the remainder of my estate, one billion dollars.” You’ve seen those scenes, right?

But in real life, often the reading of the will is comforting as we hear the last words of a loved one and experience his or her generosity one final time. How wonderful to be told and shown love one last time. And how marvelous to see a person’s life commitment demonstrated one last time.

A few years ago, while I was serving a church in another state an elderly single woman member of our congregation died. She’d never

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been married, lived modestly, loved animals and loved her church. So eventually we discovered she had left a significant amount of money to our congregation and to the local animal shelter. Honoring her wishes, we held her funeral at a local funeral home. We sang the hymns she had suggested. And the organist the funeral home supplied was so perceptive and quick on her feet that she played an impromptu postlude that made us smile. [Sung] “All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small...” I wanted to hug her.

We will all die one day. So every moment we live is precious. And we have an opportunity to leave a beautiful legacy.

In part of the Letter to the Ephesians we read this morning, Paul (or most likely a student of Paul’s) reads a will to the saints. We’re going to think for a few minutes about this will, what it means, and to whom it is written.

The will is read to “the saints.” As you may remember, the word “saint” carries different meanings. Sometimes when we say “saint” we are referring to the great heroes and heroines of the faith, persons who

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were or are particularly faithful and brave. We imagine saints who lived and even died for the faith. But saint means more than that.

Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory* is set in 1930s Mexico. The socialist government of the time is engaged in an anti-clerical purge. And we watch a "whiskey priest" (who also has a daughter he has secretly fathered) on the run from the authorities. He ministers to others in fits and starts as he goes. But finally he's captured. He awaits his execution and looks back over his life. "What an impossible fellow I am, he thought, and how useless. I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived...He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint." (Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, 210.)

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Have you ever felt like this man, a spiritual failure who just didn't quite make it? But by the end of the book we see that this priest, as messy and flawed as he is, is nonetheless a window for God's love to shine through. And with all his failings he actually *is* a saint.

The word saint carries the sense of someone who is holy, who is set apart for a special service, not set apart because he or she never sins or makes mistakes. So usually when the Bible talks about "the saints" it simply means all followers of Christ, anyone who is a Christian. And Paul says all Christians have "obtained an inheritance." Nobody has been left out. We've all been remembered in the will.

And what has been left for us? Too many things to name here, that's for sure. But we can at least note a few of the details.

Paul says we have been set apart so that we "might live for the praise of his glory..."

In other words, if we're honest, unlike some folks, we Christians are *not* baffled about why we are on the earth. Sure, we enjoy buying and owning *stuff*, but being a consumer is not our reason for existence. We also like pleasure and comfort and security, but none of these things

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is our highest value. And yes we appreciate recreation and being entertained, but again this is not the main reason for which we were born. Instead, we have been set apart so that we “might live for the praise of his glory...” We are here on the earth to praise God in prayer and corporate worship and to praise God by caring for our brothers and sisters with our lives.

Retired pastor John Buchanan says “whenever totalitarianism of any kind rears its ugly head, it’s because ordinary people have stopped caring about the life of the community and the nation.” (John Buchanan quote by Kathleen Norris in *Acedia & Me*, 127.)

Our inheritance, saints, is that we do care not just about ourselves but about the life of the community and the nation and the world, don’t we? And we aren’t confused about why we’re on the earth, are we? We live for the praise of God’s glory with our worship and with our service.

And, says Paul, we have “heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation...” So we are also given truth. The word truth means that which is real and reliable, not spin, not bluster, not lies. We are given

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truth and a pattern of kind and forgiving living that is salvation, a greater existence, a richer life, not just when we die, but right now.

And in Paul's language we are "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit..." In other words, our hope is not merely in our own efforts but sealed in the unshakeable and unbreakable presence of God.

God's purpose, God's truth, and God's sealed and certain presence--all of these things are our inheritance, something left to us by the crucified and risen Christ. This is the inheritance of the saints.

But on this All Saints Sunday we can also understand "the inheritance of the saints" in another way. It is the inheritance left for us by the saints of the church universal and especially the saints of Guilford Park Presbyterian who have gone before in faith. What have they left us?

As some of you may know, our congregation began in 1947 as a gathering of Christians who met under the oak tree across the street. I suppose they could have been satisfied with just meeting under that tree and then going back to their homes each week. It would have been easier than what they actually did. A little bit at a time they built these

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buildings in which we gather. It was expensive and time-consuming.

The members had to give sacrificially, but they were following the call of God, and they have left these buildings into our stewardship.

What else have they left us? An example. They attended worship in this church regularly. They brought their children and they invited friends and other family members to visit and to join. They established an excellent preschool. This church did not grow by accident or luck. It grew by intention and by the commitment of the members. One of you tells the story of how you came to join this congregation. You had recently moved into the area, and a church member neighbor asked if you had found a church. And when you said “no,” he immediately invited you to Guilford Park. The members of this church did evangelism in the best possible sense of the word; they practiced hospitality and invitation.

The members also taught the Christian faith to the people in this faith community. Sunday School was filled with adults and children. The church did mission in this city and beyond. This congregation practiced justice, including racial justice and justice for women. I’m told

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this was the first church in our presbytery to have a woman as one of its pastors.

Really, to sum it up, the inheritance of the saints left for us was the stewardship of their lives. They gave generously and sacrificially of their time, abilities, and money. Why? For the same reasons we do those things. One, out of gratitude for God's forgiveness and love. Two, in order to grow spiritually. And three, because they wanted to be a part of God's ministry in the world. They wanted to leave a legacy of their lives. That's why our stewardship campaign is called "Generations of Generosity."

What legacy will you and I leave? What will they say about us in a few years? Will they say, "Those people were deeply faithful. They built up the church. They continued the sacred legacy. They did their part for the reign of God. Or will they say something else?"

Paul ends this section of his Letter to the Ephesians with a final amazing word. He says we who believe have God's immeasurably great power working in us. It's a power greater than we can imagine, because it is the power of Christ. As Paul says, "God put this power to work in

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Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

Next Sunday is Stewardship Dedication Sunday. Christ will be Lord of all, and we will have the opportunity to give back because we are grateful and we want to share in Christ’s ministry and grow as Christians.

In two days, the elections will be decided, and we’ll know who our next elected leaders will be. But whoever they are, rest assured Christ will still be Lord, far above every authority and power. And we, the church, will still have the calling as Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, to be “the conscience of the nation.” Our calling will be to help heal the divisions in our country and to advocate for a government that is more decent and kind and fair for all people, because our Lord loves all people. Christ will be Lord of all and in the end he will be all in all.

In the meantime, we will care for this congregation and this community. We will seek to be faithful followers of Christ and good stewards of our lives. And we will be about the healing of our nation. This is the inheritance of the saints. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal