

Saints, Enemies, Inheritors, Voters at the Same Table
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6(20)27-31

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All Saints Sunday

As I prepared for this morning, I thought of Boston area roadways where it is not unusual to find two streets coming together at an intersection, with neither being at a right angle to the other, and where there may be an extra street intersecting to propound the confusion. My sermon title seeks to capture such an intersection.

Today, I am using the lectionary readings for All Saints Day, and in our Communion liturgy, you will be invited to remember and name the saints above of your lives. The readings include Jesus' words on loving enemies, turning the other cheek and his reiteration of Rabbi Hillel's "do unto others" words in what we call the Golden Rule. Our Ephesians lesson calls us to recognize the inheritance we have received in Jesus Christ, as we come to know him.

So, this morning, I invite you to envision being at one of those confusing, sometimes frightening Boston intersections, with this Communion table in the middle. We come from different directions and meet here as inheritors, as saints mingling with enemies, even as we have or will be voters in what many are feeling to be our less than civil societal discourse.

Our Ephesians lesson begins with the theme of inheritance, of Christ being a gift passed down to the church. The lesson then turns to thanksgiving for the Ephesians, as they live out their faith as the body of Christ. Within this we will hear the image of "the eyes of your heart," which encourages this early church to be open to a faith that is ever growing.

Let's hear words of encouragement and hope in the letter to the Church at Ephesus, Ephesians 1:11-23:

¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far 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. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Our lessons continue with Jesus' words in what is called the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke. To me, they are instructive for living in times and seasons of discord, for those that listen.

²⁷*"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you."*

At a church I served in Pittsburgh, Communion was always served with worshipers coming forward. It was a diverse congregation, by race and class, and even politics and theology. And as impressive as was its cathedral style sanctuary, with striking stained glass windows and a magnificent pipe organ, one new member offered her own view of the church's beauty, sharing, "When I look up, and watch the people go forward to take Communion, I see the world."

While we are not as diverse as that congregation, I bring that same sense of unity as we gather at the table this morning, notably two days before the end of a presidential campaign season in which I have felt palpable knots in my stomach at various moments. Perhaps my words this morning are more for those who share my feeling things are not right in our increasingly uncivil dialogue, no matter for whom you will be voting. Yet the good news is, within our shared faith, we have the invitation, the opportunity, and I think the call and responsibility to bring a different voice and witness to our community, nation, and world.

When the new church at Ephesus was established, there were also deep chasms between religions, cultures, and nations. As one biblical commentator writes, "The Jews were despised as an oddball people, addicted to such strange customs as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws that, for instance, forbade the eating of pork. Their worship of a single [God] and their veneration of Moses' law as unique did not endear them to the Greco-Roman world of religious pluralism and tolerance. On the other side, reverence for Torah became a mark of Jewish self-consciousness which quickly turned to national pride ... and a despising of other nations...." When reference is made in Ephesians 2 to "dividing walls of hostility" (2:14), it is "no exaggeration." [Martin, Ralph, *Ephesians, Colossian, and Philemon*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991) p. 30]

Dropped into this first century chasm is Christ's message of unity and reconciliation, which the church is commissioned to live out. The letter to the Ephesian church, envisions a bridging of the religious-cultural gap by extending the Jewish promise of inheritance to the Gentiles. This oneness, this unity is found in the image of the whole church being the body of Christ. It is echoed in the familiar words of Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:28), "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

This all sounds idyllic, and there are times when I long to be able to escape into a utopia of perfect peace and harmony. Some imagine this as a time from the past, a longing for a bygone era in church, culture or nation, though often the past revered by some included barriers for others. Or, as Steve Martin sings of his father playing the banjo when he was young, “Now the banjo takes me back, through the foggy haze, [where] memories of what never was, become the good old days.” [Steve Martin, from song, “Daddy Plays the Banjo” from “The Crow” album]

“*For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” And this Christ Jesus, in whom we are to be one, calls us to do some unnatural things if we are serious about being his followers, his disciples, his saints. So, when Jesus says in our Gospel lesson, “*But I say to you that listen,*” he is speaking to those who have said, “yes,” and signed on to model him as a community, as his body. What he says goes against our natural human inclination:

“*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,*

²⁸ *bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*

²⁹ *If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;”*

Jesus goes on, but with just that much, I know I can’t live up to his expectation. At the risk of being presumptuous, but I doubt many of you can either...if we think we can do it alone. Or, perhaps we can, by tweaking Jesus’ words, suggesting, “Jesus probably didn’t really mean enemy enemy.” Really? How hard is it to understand, *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you?* If there is one person who knew about enemies and hatred, I’d say it was Jesus. Our difficulty may be that he was killed as a result of his teaching, and we may be concerned what might happen to us if we live out his counter-cultural commands.

That is why we need each other to pull this off, to live as the body of Christ, and to bear witness to a world and culture where creating divisions seems the preferred norm and those seeking to heal divisions are deemed heretics. This sense of being a witness is what makes my message a stewardship message. It is not specific about budget items, but believing we at PCIS are a critical part of God’s call to show the world a different way of relationship and reconciliation, Christ’s way. I think it begins with an acknowledgment of our fallibilities and failures, our weaknesses and needs, that we are both saints and sinners in a single package.

A friend recently wrote about his 11 year old Labrador retriever who had a significant limp. In good preacherly fashion, he transferred his dog’s limp into a metaphor as he wrote, “The church (like the world at large) is full of people who limp. ...Almost everyone in the pews is carrying some sort of burden, worry or pain.” This friend is the pastor of the church in Pittsburgh I described earlier, and my mind went to that picture of people now limping forward to the Communion table, with their wounds and scars and hurts. And while in that church, and here, we tend to cover up hurts, and be private about the scars we bear, I find it freeing to know the saint seated beside us today is also wounded.

The saints above of our own lives, who we remember and celebrate on All Saints Day, were not perfect. Along with the goodness and love they sifted over our lives, which we may still feel daily, our saints may have also passed along an inheritance of prejudices, hatreds or bad habits. So, while today we mark a oneness of saints above and saints below, we do not find our unity in the saints, but in Christ. “O blest communion, fellowship divine. We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, and all are thine.”

With our sainthood mixed with our sinnerhood, it would be easy to despair, particularly at this time in our nation. I appreciate Thomas Merton’s perspective in such times, as he writes:

“You do not need to know precisely what is happening or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and the challenges offered by the present moment and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.” [Thomas Merton, much quoted but not sourced.]

I find such hope and encouragement in our Ephesians lesson. ¹⁷*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,*

As you come to know him – a reminder that faith for saints is a lifelong journey, and together, in Christ, we can have *the eyes of our heart enlightened*. Our hearts are more than receptacles of compassion, but encompass wisdom as well. As the eyes of our hearts are enlightened, we then become immersed in:

the hope to which Christ has called us,
the riches of the glorious inheritance with which we have been entrusted to witness,
and the immeasurable greatness of Christ’s power and love for us.

Hope, inheritance, power, lived out in a community where in humility we acknowledge each one of us is both sinner and saint. This Tuesday, I will vote for the right person for president. I know some of you will likely vote for the wrong person; of course, you will believe I am voting for the wrong person and you the right one. It is on Wednesday, we will each face the challenge to witness to our nation and world, a oneness that transcends politics. Let’s begin today, at this table, where saints, enemies, inheritors and Republicans and Democrats, Greens and Libertarians and all sorts of Independents are welcomed, by Christ, and each other, and through Christ we are made one.