

SERMON: Obtaining Our Inheritance

TEXT: Ephesians 1:11-23

A number of years ago, I officiated at the funeral of a beloved church member. She was a lovely person who came to church every Sunday and Bible Study every week, and she served her church and her Lord cheerfully and faithfully. It was disappointing then, to many in her church family, that the only service held for her was private; a graveside service was all the family wanted. And the only ones who attended that were her daughter and granddaughter.

This was the first time I had ever met these family members and I wanted to give them a chance to share some memories and to honor her personally before she was lowered into the ground. I asked her daughter question to spark her memory, “What was the greatest gift your mother ever gave you?” After just a moment or two of thought, the daughter answered, “She gave me her old Cadillac.”

Well, it wasn't quite the answer I was expecting. I was hoping to hear more about the intangible legacies people leave; personality traits like love, generosity, compassion, acceptance; or special skills and talents like being a good cook or having a beautiful voice or taking in stray animals.

Of course, when we are deep in grief, we don't always think straight. She might have answered differently in a less stressful moment. Also, it is true that some tangible items can have great sentimental value. Maybe the car symbolized the mother's spirit of independence, or it might have been the vehicle used when she taught her daughter how to drive.

I guess I am more interested in hearing about the intangible gifts because they are immeasurable and eternal. A gift like acceptance, for instance, can be given and given, over and over again to everyone you meet, and you would never run out. It can be shared far and wide, and once given, it can never be taken away. It's the tangible things we inherit – the money, the jewelry, the land, the boat, the house – that end up causing terrible and sometimes irreparable family arguments.

I read a book written by a pastor about his work as a hospice chaplain. In it he shared many fascinating stories about people he had spent time with through their dying and death. One story told about a man – a father of grown children – who was in and out of a comatose state as he neared death. His children were all present during one of his comatose periods, and they made the mistake of arguing over his estate and the inheritance they expected at his passing. They apparently had never learned that hearing is one of the last senses we lose when we're dying.

Yes, their father heard their arguing. Hours later, he was fully awake and alert and asking to speak to his lawyer. He changed his will so that none of his children would receive any inheritance. And then he died.

The passage we read today from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, began with these words: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance." In just twelve verses, the word *inheritance* occurs three times.

What comes to mind when you hear that word, *inheritance*? The tangibles or the intangibles? The inheritance you were grateful for or the inheritance you thought you deserved? The inheritance you wish for or the inheritance you know never existed or is already gone?

One theologian commented on this passage from Ephesians, "the inheritance believers receive in Christ... implies a common bond among Christians. Those who inherit together share the inheritance.... Paul's prayers [of thanksgiving] for the community begin by recalling not only their faith but also their *love toward all the saints,*" meaning primarily their love for one another as believers. (*Texts for Preaching*, Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, Newsome, Westminster John Knox Press, 1984)

So, first we need to understand that we are all saints. Yes, as believers in Christ, chosen and called and made holy by God, **we are all saints**. Okay, not according to the Roman Catholic Church, and certainly not according to the way we behave at times. But several places in the New Testament support this understanding of a saint.

Next, the inheritance WE receive in Christ, implies that *we all share that inheritance*. Everyone belonging to the Christian family receives the inheritance. There's plenty to go around, plenty for every person to receive *more* than we deserve. Yet, we still fight over it like the siblings in the story I told a moment ago.

We compete – inwardly, at least – to determine who's a better Christian. We compare our faithfulness and deeds of service with others. We fight over what the Bible means, and what God thinks of us, and what Jesus would do, and who is worthy of heaven.

But, what is the inheritance exactly? Is it personal salvation and an eternal home in heaven?

Paul's prayer continues, "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, so 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, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe...."

The inheritance Paul prays for is wisdom, revelation, and hope. The inheritance is given to us in our lifetime. And the riches of the inheritance are *among the saints*. We obtain our inheritance in Christ, not as individual saints, but together, among the saints. We belong together, and we gain strength from one another. Wisdom from the saints of the past, revelation from the saints of the present, hope from the saints of the future.

Today, we remember and honor and celebrate all that we have received from the saints of our past. They lived their faith and taught their faith and passed on their faith to us. This church is here, and we are here because of the saints of our past. As we remember them, we continue to be inspired and empowered by them to live out our faith and teach it to those who come after us. We must treasure and

honor our inheritance, keeping the church vital and alive for the next generation.

We are the saints for those who will come after us.

The words we recite in the Apostle's Creed include, "I believe in the communion of saints." I will confess that I never knew what this meant until I learned it in seminary. We believe that when we share in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we are sharing it with all the saints – past, present, and future. All those people who used to fill these pews, those who greeted us at the door, those who passed us the offering plate, those who sang in the choir, those who cared for babies in the nursery... they are present at the table with us whenever we gather. And the saints of the future, there's a place for them here, as well. This is a family table that extends far beyond this room, this time, this place.

The glorious inheritance we have in Christ is not just for you or me to obtain, to get possession of and keep all to ourselves, but for us – for the church, for all believers – to teach, to model, to nurture, and to support among those who will come after us.

As we come to the table and remember the inheritance we have obtained from our saints, may we be inspired and empowered to share wisdom, revelation, and hope... to the glory of God!

AMEN.