

Sermon (11/6/16, Ephesians 1: 11-23):

‘In Christ you have also obtained an inheritance.’ Begins the passage I just read from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. It is what a day like today, All Saints Sunday, calls to mind. It starkly bids us to remember what we have inherited and from whom this inheritance has come. It provokes us to pause from our busy routines to reflect upon what we have been given by those whom we have loved and known and who have shaped us into the people we are. It is a reminder that we are not islands unto ourselves but part of a larger garment made up of many different fabrics, somehow bonded together by a mysterious thread of divine circumstance and calling.

I guess inheritance has become a word with many varied meanings these days. It might refer to genetics. Written in my genes, for instance, is this bald spot on the back of my head. It’s a gene that runs strong among males in my family. I have already warned my son that despite the thick head of hair he now has, not unlike what I once had, the day will surely come.

DNA tests can now reveal our geographic heritage. Perhaps, it might tell us we are not as Irish or as German or as English as we thought we were. Perhaps it might tell us we need to turn in our lederhosen for a kilt or our love for Irish whiskey for a fine French Wine.

Because of these many new avenues for exploring our heritage, there seems to be a renewed interest in it. Websites and genetic testing seem to be increasing in their popularity. Exploring and deciphering the branches of our family trees have become quite the curiosity.

A favorite childhood memory I have is a trip I took with my father and grandfather to Ellis Island. It was the last trip I made

with my Grandfather. Reconstruction on the island, which would eventually turn it into quite an amazing tourist sight, had only just begun so what we saw was mostly decaying buildings and shadows of yesterday.

I remember my Grandfather telling me during that trip that this is where my ancestors had come when they arrived from Wales. I don't know how true that is but it was the first time I had heard this news and suddenly that run down island took on added significance. No longer was it just a place to see but also a place to feel, to come close to my inheritance. Somewhere on this small island passed the feet of those whose genes were a part of me. Admittedly, most likely those feet were flat but, none the less they were the feet of my heritage.

*The word 'inheritance' might also conjure up such legal things as Wills and Trusts; instructions about material things left to us and other family members from those who are deceased. Such moments can sometimes bring out the ugly in families as they squabble over the inequity of their share or feel hurt by some subtle or not so subtle slight made by the maker of the will. Grudges die hard, it seems, and even inheritances left by the dead can leave a painful mark.*

As a church, today we mark this day by remembering the saints – personal saints, saints within our congregational family, saints from whom our heritage of faith has come. Meeting, as we do each Sunday, in a building as old as this one is, tends to lend itself to a unique kind of remembering. As we look around, we can't help but to sense that we are the beneficiaries of many who lived by faith and who saw beyond themselves to even us whose names they did not know. By way of their sacrifices and care, we have this place to worship in, to grow in, and to be a faith

community in. Their stories permeate these walls and, if we listen carefully, they speak to us. They tell us of the time when organ music filled this room because someone hand pumped the air through the console and the pipes. They tell us of the time when a mighty wind storm blew the steeple right off the roof of this building into the church's front yard. They tell us of a bored someone who drew a picture on a door in the balcony of what was probably a parishioner sitting in this sanctuary many years ago, sporting a high, pointed, starched collar. They tell us of a furnace that once needed to be stoked with coal to warm this room and of a kerosene chandelier that once illuminated the words of hymns that we continue to sing. They tell us of those who risked much and probably argued much and disagreed much but still, somehow, they held together, agreeing that the bond of Christian love was stronger than that which would otherwise tear them apart.

I think too, as I'm sure you also do, of more recent saints whose presence is still sorely missed – we know their names, we remember their faces, we can still see their smiles and, maybe, even their stern gaze that made us shake a little. How deep and profound our love is for them and while the freshness of their absence might not feel as acute as it once did, the grief is still there.

As part of this, we can't help but to also feel gratitude for the saints who remain-our dear companions whom we share this life's journey with. Our abiding friendships which we always regret we don't have more time for.

In all of this remembering, we realize again just how special this place is and how wondrous the bonds that God creates between us really are.

The thing about inheritances is that they tend to primarily

focus on the past – the places from which we came, the genes passed onto us from yesterday, the names and faces of those who have crossed our paths.

The inheritance Paul speaks of, however, is so much more than that – it also points to the future. It points not just to what God has done or even is doing but also to the promise of what God will do – the glory that is yet to be, the reunion that is yet to come, the redeeming that is yet to be realized, the meal that is yet to be shared, the promise we are called to lean into and shape our lives around.

‘I pray,’ Paul writes, ‘that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...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 according to the work of his great power.’

It is one thing to observe and analyze and learn from what we see with our eyes or hear with our ears or feel with our hands. As people of faith, however, we are also called to see and hear and smell and taste and know with something more than just our physical senses but with ‘the spirit of wisdom and revelation that fills the eyes of the heart with enlightenment,’ as Paul puts it.

It is not unlike the reminder given to us in the ‘Meaning of the Sacrament’, which we periodically read on Communion Sundays. ‘We come in hope, believing that as surely as we eat this bread and drink from this cup, we are tasting our promised inheritance of what is yet to come.’

Admittedly, it is not easy to see with the eyes of a heart enlightened by faith. We are trained from a very young age to

believe that only seeing is believing and truth is limited to what we can prove. Every now and again, though, when, I guess, my heart is most open due to grief, or struggle, or desperation, or just simply letting my guard down long enough for the Spirit to get in, I sense at this table something I have never sensed anywhere else. A sample, if you will, of not just an inheritance I have received but of a promised inheritance that is yet to come. A taste of what it will be like to sit down to a hearty meal again in the company of all those whom I love and miss. A taste of what it will be like laugh again, argue again, maybe even shed a tear or two again with *all* of God's saints including you, me, and all the people, past and present, whom we love. The people who have shaped us into the people we are, the people who are gone but surely not forgotten, the people we are separated from due to distance of space and time.

This is our inheritance as God's beloved saints. This is our inheritance we are called to train our eyes to look for. This is our inheritance we are invited to participate in and experience in the present. This is our inheritance I pray we will all come to know and fully embrace as we see it with eyes of heart enlightened.

So come, sisters and brothers, saints of Almighty God, come, for all things are now ready.

To God alone be all the glory!