

Inheritance
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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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, ¹²so 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 towards 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 towards 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.

Luke 6:20-31

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²² ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ ‘But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ ‘Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ ‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

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

When I prepare each week, I consider the questions I have about our readings which you might share and I seek to answer them; if you ever find you're left with questions, ask me and I'll try to help you find answers where they can be found. When I prepare I wonder what word or phrase might catch your attention which also caught mine. Today, that word for me was "inheritance." In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of an inheritance but not the same kind of inheritance of which you and I may likely think. Maybe what comes to mind for you is the type of inheritance that is split among heirs, sometimes contentiously. Or maybe you think of inherited traits, like a knack for solving word puzzles or the way I rest my hand under my chin, with my elbow supported on my other hand just like my mom does.

This inheritance Paul speaks of is not like either of these inheritances. Our inheritance from Christ is not allocated with each getting some (or some getting all and others getting none); through Christ we all have whole shares of this inheritance. The inheritance from Christ is not selective like my posture habit – my brother does not share this "at rest" position. And it's not like the movie-style inheritance where the heir must fulfill some requirement before gaining access to the inheritance – you know the story: find a mate, get his act together, change her life in some way. We **all** have obtained this inheritance in Christ. On this day, when we especially remember the saints who have come before, we are assured that such an inheritance is not depleted by those who come before, nor can it be grown for those who come after for it is already and always in its fullest measure. Paul describes it this way: "I pray that...you may know what is the hope to which [God] has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power." We have gained this inheritance because God desires that we have it, not through or because of any behavior of our own.

What is this inheritance? Well, it's complicated and it's not. What Luke speaks of is not the same as what Paul speaks of and what they each speak of is for very different reasons. Luke's telling of the Beatitudes differs from Matthew's in a number of ways, most notably that Luke includes the "woes." "Woe to you who are rich...woe to you who are full now...woe to you who are laughing now...woe to you when all speak well of you." We hear these woes and, rightly, worry that to be blessed is not our lot, is not **our** inheritance. Am I poor? Am I hungry? Am I weeping? Am I hated and excluded and reviled and defamed? No? Then my reward must fall under the "woes." If this is a message of God's love for all God's children, does that make sense? No. The meaning of these Beatitudes is not to proclaim hope for some and hopelessness for others.

Professor E. Elizabeth Johnson illuminates these Beatitudes this way:

To be blessed is to have a relationship with God that is not in jeopardy. The rich...are all perfectly able to take care of themselves, and they do so admirably. It is their very self-sufficiency that traps them and separates them from God. Those who lay up treasures for themselves are not – and cannot be – rich toward God, because when we can take perfectly good care of ourselves, it is altogether too easy for us not to trust God. It is not only greed that jeopardizes the wealthy Christian’s relationship with God, but the simple – and subtle – temptation to think that we can take care of ourselves...On the one hand, the poor and hungry, the sad and the scorned, are blessed because God has special concern for them...The poor are blessed because God is on their side and because they are forced by their circumstances to rely solely on the mercy of God, from whom all sustenance comes. Blessedness means not only that God exercises particular concern for one, but also that one relies exclusively on God.¹

For Luke, in this context, our inheritance is a relationship with God, freely given. We only need to desire to receive. God does not demand that we change our lives to receive the inheritance; simply, we find the inheritance if we do. We look to, and learn from, the saints who came before us, seeking to learn the ways they received as we are trying to receive.

These are also the saints upon whom Paul calls in the letter to the Ephesians. We are among the saints in God’s glorious inheritance, in this inheritance towards redemption as God’s own people. This specific inheritance is one of many gifts of God. Associate Dean at Andover Newton Theological Seminary, Sarah Birmingham Drummond, suggests the inheritance passed down is the resurrection. In the resurrection, she writes, “the central theme is unity in God, through Christ, and the broad inheritance to which those who are in Christ are entitled. An inherited resurrection is among the gifts, but the grand nature of the narrative suggests that it is just one of the riches Christ can impart to those who believe.”² Her suggestion is confirmed if we go back only a few verses – you may have noted that our reading opens with “In Christ we have **also** obtained an inheritance.”

Paul opens the letter by stating, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses...he has made known to us the mystery of his will.”³ You know that other movie gimmick – the surprise inheritance? The long-lost aunt who is suddenly revealed after her death through an enormous, life-changing gift? Well, leave out the long-lost aunt and this inheritance **is** like that. Not only are we given redemption and forgiveness, seemingly too good to be believed, but we have every spiritual blessing, knowledge of the mystery of God’s will, **and** adoption into a loving family.

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 241.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 232.

³ Ephesians 3:3-10.

Today, it is that inheritance of family, that family we share through unity in God, that family we share because of our trust in the resurrection and the promise of redemption, which we particularly lift up. Pastor Robert E. Dunham shares:

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 of the pile and set it apart on the stone hearth. Its fire and warmth soon died out. It is in the company of saints that we find our life and vitality as we seek to live as faithful bearers of the inheritance we have received. In such company we find comfort in our losses, courage for the daily struggles, and hope as we face the future together.⁴

May every day be filled with wonder at, and thanks for, such gifts, so plentiful and joy-filled from a God who loves us so.

Let us pray: Holy God, open our hearts that we may receive the inheritance you have so generously given. Amen.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 233/5.