

November 6, 2016  
All Saints' Sunday  
Ephesians 1:11-23/ Luke 6:20-31  
The Rev. Carenda Baker

*"I pray 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 God 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. . .".* I speak to you in the name of the Holy Trinity – Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Today's reading from Ephesians gives us a wonderfully rich text for this All Saints' Sunday. It offers a guide to help us reflect on three particular gifts we have been given. So, I offer here a word about each of those three gifts – inheritance, hope, and power

First – A story about an **INHERITANCE**.

In the early 1980's when I lived in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware I was active as a lay person at Epworth United Methodist Church. I became friends with one Miss E. Josephine Branford, a native of the eastern shore of Maryland. Jo had retired to her parents' home in Rehoboth Beach. Jo was the daughter of a United Methodist and had been a public school English teacher for many years. She was an active and vital member of Epworth Church and was a committed volunteer in the Rehoboth Beach community. She had cared for her only brother in his final days as he lived with and eventually died of cancer. That experience led to her becoming a hospice volunteer. She was a member of Epworth's adult choir, active in adult spiritual formation opportunities, and served on both of the major leadership and decision-making committees of the church. She had many gifts: hospitality, patience with all aged folks, kindness, compassion, faith, listening, creativity, wisdom, and she was great at organization and practical problem-solving. Jo was a devout woman of deep faith, and I learned later, that one of her spiritual disciplines was the practice of tithing – giving 10% of her income to God. She was very supportive of me, when as a relative newcomer to the church I became Epworth's volunteer choir director. She was very encouraging of

my sense of call to the ordained ministry, and regularly wrote me letters during my 3 years of seminary, my years serving as a United Methodist pastor, and after I transitioned from parish ministry into a career as a social worker. I visited her periodically through the years at her home in Rehoboth Beach. As happens, over time, our contact became more sporadic. In the letters she sent, I noticed changes in her handwriting; there was marked brevity in the content and some repetitiveness in what she wrote. I eventually lost touch with Jo, and the last I had heard from anyone who knew her, was that she had moved into a nursing facility somewhere on the eastern shore in either Delaware or Maryland.

In 2005, at least 4-5 years or more after I'd had any contact with Jo, I got a call from an attorney in Delaware who was handling Jo's estate. The attorney informed me that I was named as a beneficiary in Jo's will. Up until that moment, I did not even know she had died. Jo had designated Epworth Church, me, and two others of her close friends as beneficiaries.

Now – I do not play the lottery, and have only once entered a Publishers Clearinghouse sweepstakes contest. So I'm sure you can imagine what a surprise it was when I learned that my inheritance from Jo's estate was \$100,000. I was pretty much in shock, dumbfounded really. I wept in both gratitude and sadness at knowing that this once dear friend, Christian sister and mentor in the faith had died. And she wasn't even alive so I could thank her in person for this incredibly gracious gift. I have prayed and thought often about Jo's spirit of love and generosity, and her deep faith and trust in God. She was a person grounded and secure in God's love for her. She knew the riches of the inheritance of faith in Christ which she had learned and lived, and passed on to many others through her teaching, her friendship, and giving of her time, talent, and treasure.

None of us has come to the Christian faith alone or in a vacuum. Most of us have been taught about the faith by others, and grown to claim that faith as our own. But now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we – Christ's body, the Church – find ourselves in a much different world than the one in which we grew up and have spent most of our lives. For us as

Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church, our place now on the margins of society is very similar to the reality which the early Christians faced. Now, the Christian faith is more caught than taught. This means people who are not Christians and are spiritual seekers watch how we live, more than they listen to the words we speak about the faith or about Jesus. If they are to come to faith in Christ, they will be drawn in through caring relationships with believers, because what many are seeking is deeper spiritual experience, a safe place to ask important questions, and a community to which they can belong and contribute. Just like it was for the first disciples who followed Jesus, today's seekers learn about the faith by hanging out with us, doing what we do, discovering why we do what we do. Seekers today are looking for authenticity and faith in action. We have incredible opportunities to show that our inheritance as followers of Jesus is about claiming a relationship with God in Christ, and living in community as life-long apprentices, learning together and practicing spiritual disciplines as we follow Jesus. If you look at these stained glass windows that surround us, in 10 of the 12 windows Jesus is depicted. In all of them he appears with other people. In none of those windows is he alone.

And now a word about ***“the HOPE to which God has called us”***. Hope is not wishful thinking. Hope is not about having a glass half-full perspective. Pollyanna abounded in optimism. Paul abounded in hope. Hope is what kept Paul fighting the good fight despite opposition, shipwrecks, scorn, and torture. Hope is what kept him praying and praising even while he was in prison. Hope is gutsy, courageous, and longsuffering, because it is fed by deep and abiding trust in the goodness and love of God.

***“The hope to which God has called us”*** is life grounded in the death and resurrection of Christ. Christian hope speaks to that deepest part of you and me, those things that keep us awake at night. Hope is what we need when our backs are up against the wall, when the going is rough, the way is hard, and the pain is deep. Christian hope speaks to the longing and the ache of our hearts. It speaks to those places inside us that we show to no one. In those places where there may be regret or bitterness about things said or not said, things done and left undone. It may be feelings of

abandonment, or a sense of betrayal. It may be deep disappointment because we've been let down by a loved one or a friend, the church, or even God. All the worries about the future and the sadness we can't shake. Whatever is at the core of pain and of longing in our lives, Christian hope speaks to it. Better than that, Christian hope speaks into it. Jesus' death and resurrection spoke God's "No" to despair and hopelessness. Paul, or whoever the writer of this letter was, is praying that the Ephesians' faith would mature, that they would know the great hope of God, that they would know there is always a dawn with God and the night does not last forever. In the midst of the night God is not absent or unconcerned, but present, attentive and active. The writer of this letter wants those believers in Ephesus to never forget that they are ever and always serving a risen and living Lord, though all around them it often looks like a "Good Friday" world. Hope waits, it abides, even in the face of despair, because it knows God is not finished.

And finally, a word about POWER – ***“the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe”***. The author of Ephesians goes on to say that this power of which he writes is the same power that was present in the resurrection of Christ. Well that makes sense, because God's major business is raising the dead to life. And that same resurrection power lives in and is at work in us. It is not power that dominates and controls. It is enabling power, strengthening power, life-giving and life-changing power, power to unleash goodness and kindness and love in the world.

The blessed good news is that this power is not about us. It is about God. We don't generate this power on our own by trying to make ourselves bigger and better, set apart and above others, invincible and invulnerable. This is about the power of God working through us as followers of a risen Lord. We are heirs, the channels through whom God's power and love flows. God is the source, the constant. No matter the circumstances around us, God and God's power is the constant.

Friends, we are the earthly part of the great company of saints in light, and we remember and give thanks today for the myriads who have gone on ahead of us to love and praise God, and to serve now as holy cheerleaders for us. Let us pray that God's Spirit will breathe in us, inspiring us to walk as believers alive with hope, filled with power, joyfully and generously paying forward to future generations the rich inheritance of faith and love we have received. That inheritance is not for us to keep. It is for us to give away. For we are the heirs of a rich past and the promise of a rich future, blessed to be a blessing for the life of the world, and for the sake of the Lord we love. Thanks be to God! Amen.