

Worship Series: “This We Believe”

“We Believe in the Communion of Saints”—Sermon Text: Ephesians 1:11-23

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

25th Sunday after Pentecost: 6 November 2016

“The history of saints is mainly the history of insane people”

(--Benito Mussolini).

Walt Kowalski, (Clint Eastwood), is not in my favorite scene in the movie *Grand Torino*. Walt has passed on. The scene to which I refer is the “reading of the will.” A lawyer is poised to reveal who gets the Grand Torino, a classic car—crucial to the story. Walt’s entitled granddaughter is sure she will receive the car. Instead it goes to one of those Walt has called by derisive names his whole life. Hearing only shuffling papers a whole family waits to hear what they will inherit from a deceased loved one. Today we hear what Ephesians offers those who sit quietly and listen.

Hear now our day’s lesson:

11 In 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. 13 In 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; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 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, 18 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, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 20 God 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, 21 far 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. 22 And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:11-23).

How do we know our spiritual inheritance from God is so great? We know when we read Ephesians 1. We also see that it comes from any number of things: God’s will, God’s grace, God’s power, and God’s purpose. Many Christian people believe that before the world’s foundation, God planned our inheritance and gave it to us in Jesus. We need not fear someone stealing our inheritance. God guarantees it.

So hear me when I say our whole lesson hangs on this particular phrase in verse 11 of Ephesians chapter 1: “**In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance.**” We call those who trust this “believers” and surprisingly in the New Testament by another name: “saints.” But for some reason or another we mostly have an aversion for someone to call us saints, although it is a perfectly good word from our New Testament. It even appears in Ephesians 1:1. A saint is anyone whom God has saved and then set apart for holy use. Even our Apostle’s Creed acknowledges this each Sunday we recite it together: “I believe in . . . **the communion of saints.**”

Yet to many Protestant believers, the phrases “the holy catholic church” and “communion of saints” from this creed trouble us. “Saints” in the New Testament refers to baptized believers in a local congregation, such as the saints at Corinth, or Ephesus, or Colossae. More than a few of these believers were far from saintly in their behavior, but they were holy by virtue of their participation (*communio*) in Christ. The book of Hebrews recognizes “a great cloud of witnesses.” The writer could have just as easily used the phrase “a great cloud of saints.” These are people of faith who surround us as we walk the gratitude path. By so doing God enables our response to the biblical summons to holiness. We draw near each other as we look to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2).

Back in 1988 a California woman named Joyce Landorf published a little book that packed a punch. Its title is *Balcony People* and she proposed:

. . . that we have two kinds of people in our lives. We have balcony people and we have basement people. Basement people lurk in the murky waters of your subconscious mind. They are the people who have said things to you or said things about you that have wounded you and injured your capacity to be the person that God wants you to be. They are negative, critical and pull you down. They ruin the dreams that you have to do something significant with your life for God. Got some basement people in your life? Balcony people are just the opposite. Their goal is our Christlikeness. The apostle Paul was a balcony person. He even said to his disciples, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” Balcony people are the fire-up, positive, upbeat people who see the good in everything and always cheer you on and try to encourage you to be the person that God wants you to be. They build you up and fire you up and speak faith and confidence and trust in God into your life and they give you a vision of doing something more and being more of what God has called you to be. Are you a balcony person to the people in your life (From James MacDonald’s: *Balcony People—A Study in Philemon*)?

On All Saint's Sunday we lift up the names and sacred memories of those who have been balcony people for many of us. Ephesians suggests that we "might live for the praise of Christ's glory." In Ephesians we see how key it is for us to encourage one another in faith. Christianity is not a solo act, but rather is song of the whole community—it takes all of us speaking words of encouragement to one another so that we might not forget Christ and what God has done for us. And what is interesting to me—and what we are celebrating today—is that those who encourage us in the present are believers or saints. These persons are from our past. Perhaps we will emerge as saints in another believer's future.

What balcony people give us is encouragement and therefore hope. What we give back to our balcony people is being that for those who will succeed us. We offer sacred caring for the things that our balcony people deemed important. We could call this tradition. Our traditions act as a compass for all of our human relationships and personal interactions, the qualitative experiences of our family and church life, and ultimately, the development of civilized societies themselves. As we honor traditions, so we learn to honor ourselves, and in the final analysis, each other.

My father never said anything as forceful as "Son, I am disappointed in you because I know you can do better." It is for this reason that I try to do my best in all that I do—for by yours and my doing so we honor those who have cared about us most deeply.

"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance." Don't blow it! Amen.

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