

I

When I was a small boy, maybe five or six years old, my grandmother took me to the brand new shopping mall that had just opened in the next town over. Inside the mall was an old-fashioned ice cream parlor, and Grandma bought me an ice cream soda – a treat I’d never before experienced. Apparently I had lots to say to everyone about how much I enjoyed the ice cream soda, and Grandma took delight in watching me take delight.

That Christmas, she presented me with a small handmade Christmas ornament – no bigger than the end of my thumb. It was a small plastic cup, like the kind often used to hold communion wine, and inside was glued a little piece of cotton and a tiny plastic straw, and it looked just like an old-fashioned ice cream soda.

That little Christmas ornament, just a tiny plastic cup with a little cotton ball – probably wouldn’t sell at a holiday market for 50 cents. But I guard and protect and cherish it because Grandma died nearly 20 years ago, but every time I look at it, I can hear her laugh. Everytime I look at it, I can see the sparkle in her eyes and feel the joy in her heart as she delighted in my delight. Everytime I look at it, I can taste the sweetness of that ice cream soda.

That little Christmas ornament might not mean much to anyone else. But to me, it represents part of my inheritance.

II

All of us, to one extent or another, have inherited things from the generations that have lived before us. Some of those things that we have inherited are biological traits like the color of our eyes. Some of those things that we have inherited are material resources. And some of those things cannot be measured or quantified but we mark them nonetheless, like values and traditions.

But what about us as a people of faith in Jesus Christ? What is our inheritance, and what will we leave to the generations that will come after us? These are the questions that are before us today in our text from the letter to the Ephesians.

III

This Fall, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament, but we’re shifting gears today as we observe All Saints’ Sunday – a day when we remember and give thanks for all the faithful saints of the church who have finished their race, who rest from their labors, and who now live eternally with Christ.

And so our reading for this morning is drawn from a letter that was written sometime in the first few decades after Jesus’ resurrection and the birth of the church to a group of Christians living in and around a city called Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey.

Most of the followers of Jesus who were living in and around Ephesus in those days had not been born and raised as Jews. Rather, they had been born and raised worshipping the many gods of the Greeks or Romans, and collectively, they were called Gentiles, that is, non-Jews. One of the early theological questions that emerged in the first century of the church centered around the status of Gentile Christians, that is, those who had not been born and raised as Jews. Were they included in God's plan of salvation, or was it only for people who could prove their bonafides back to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and sons. Ephesus was part of the Roman empire, and so the followers of Jesus living in and around Ephesus were familiar with Roman laws and customs as they related to families and issues like adoption and inheritance.

And so the writer of Ephesians turns to these ideas as he describes for the Ephesians the radical transformation of their social and personal identities that has been accomplished in Christ, and their new status in him.

So listen now for a Word from God from Ephesians 1:11-23.

*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, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 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; this[b] is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love[c] towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 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, according to the working of his great power. God[d] 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, 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. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

#### IV

My friend, maybe you come from a great family. Maybe you've inherited

all kinds of resources from the generations that came before you.

Or maybe you come from a family tree that has more than its fair share of nuts and squirrels in the branches. Maybe all you've inherited from them is your genetics.

Or maybe you know nothing about your family tree at all.

Whatever the case may be, my friend, remember this. In Christ you have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will.

In Christ, you have obtained an inheritance. You are loved, you are cherished, you are destined for an inheritance beyond your wildest imagining, not because of who you are or who your people are. You are loved, you are cherished, you are worthy, not because of anything you've said or done or not said or not done.

You are loved, you are cherished, you are worthy because in Christ you have obtained an inheritance through the pleasure of God's divine will. In life and in death, you belong, body and soul, not to yourself but to your faithful savior Jesus Christ, and there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can ever change that. Because of Jesus Christ, you have obtained an inheritance.

The question is, what will you do with it? The question is, what legacy of faith will you leave for the generations that will come after you?

My very first day in the office as the pastor of the Ridglea Presbyterian Church in Fort Worth, Texas, began like most first days at a new job. I filled out some paperwork, put some personal things in my desk, learned how to work the coffee maker and the copy machine and such.

About noon the mail came, and in the day's mail was a large brown envelope with the return address of a prominent Fort Worth law firm. And the package was addressed to me.

I was puzzled, because for the life of me I couldn't imagine what I had done in four hours that would draw the attention of a law firm. But when I opened the package, I learned that a saint of that church named Dr. Carl Everett had died some months prior to my arrival, and he had left a portion of his remaining estate to the church to be used at the discretion of the session.

I never had the chance to meet Dr. Everett this side of heaven. But when my turn comes to take my place at the great heavenly banquet, I'm going to make a point to find him and shake his hand, because his act of generosity made an enormous impact on the mission and ministry of his church that day and for generations to come.

And by the way, the day the church received the letter informing us

of Dr. Everett's gift – it was a November 1, All Saints Day.

V

As we gather this morning in this sacred and historic space, we can't help but be mindful of the generations of saints in this church who have gone before us. By no means were they perfect, but you and I are the living beneficiaries of all that was in them that was good and kind and faithful. You and I are the living beneficiaries of the grace that God poured into them, the grace that kindled in them the love of God's name and enabled them to serve God faithfully.

Whenever we recite the Apostles' Creed, we say this little line, I believe in the communion of the saints. In our Presbyterian way of being the church, when we come to the Lord's Table, we believe that this is more than just a symbol, just a memorial. We believe that somehow, someway, the Holy Spirit is present and active in this Sacrament, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, when we come to this Table, we are lifted up into communion with Christ and with all the saints of the church. We believe when we come to this Table that the line between the living and the dead is not nearly so sharp as the world would have us believe.

And so when we come to this Table, we come with those who are in this room, and with those who have worshiped in this room for over 160 years. We come with our families and friends who are with us in body, and

with our family and friends who are with us in spirit. We come with Paul and Lydia and Lazarus and Mary. And we also come with Jean Hopkins and Jeremy Kilpatrick and Ann Jones. And we come with Fran Baer and with Carl Everett and with all of those who have finished the race and who are a part of our great cloud of witnesses that cheers us on today.

When we come to this Table, we remember that this meal is more than just a symbol, more than just a crust of bread. This is, a taste of what waits for us at the heavenly banquet, when they will come from north and south and east and west and sit together at table in the kingdom of heaven. This is, as the old hymn says, a foretaste of glory divine.

When we come to this Table, we remember that we worship and serve a savior whom God has seated at his right hand in the heavenly places, 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.

When we come to this Table, we remember that we have been marked and sealed with the Holy Spirit, the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Thanks be to God for all the saints!

Amen.