

**Rev. Ellen Dawson | November 3, 2019**  
**Ephesians 1:11-23 | "The Service of Saints" | H2O Service**  
**- ALL SAINTS DAY -**  
**FOX CHAPEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Scripture Reading --**  
**Ephesians 1:11-23 (NRSV)**

*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.*

**Paul's Prayer**

*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.*

One of my favorite stories of a Saint is the story of St. John the Short – a man born around the year 340 in Egypt who became known as one of the Desert Fathers, a group of early Christian monks and hermits. He was known to be a devout and pious person since he was very young. At the age of 18, he dug an underground cave in the desert so he could escape and pray.

It is said he had an advisor that noticed his biggest faults were impatience and arrogance. So, John was asked to perform an apparently pointless task: he was to plant a walking stick in the ground and water it every day. It may seem like a bit ridiculous. And you may wonder how this task would teach him anything. Well, the nearest source of water was 12 miles away. So John made the round trip every day without a word of complaint. Every day for three years John watered the walking stick. And sure enough, one day, the walking stick sprouted leaves. Then flowers and fruit. John carried the stick into the monastery, announcing: “Take and eat the fruit of obedience.”

Now I didn't grow up Catholic – I only came to know and understand more about who these Saints were and how they came to be recognized and honored by the Catholic church. But I want to make sure we are clear – it wasn't the Catholic Church that actually started the Sainthood thing. In the early years when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians, so many martyrs died for their faith that the early Orthodox Church set aside special days to honor them. It was Pope Gregory the Third who assigned All Saints Day to be celebrated on November 1<sup>st</sup>.

In that day, people would prepare for the All Saints celebration by holding a vigil on Hallow's Eve, which of course is now known as Halloween. The vigil was actually heavily influenced by Sow-wen (Samhain), a Celtic pagan religious festival, celebrated from October 31<sup>st</sup> to November 1<sup>st</sup>. Sow-wen was a time to welcome in the harvest and usher in the dark half of the year.

I share this because I think it's so important for us to understand the history of All Saints Day – a day that originally was set aside to honor those who died for their faith in Jesus Christ. It's also become a day that is easily overshadowed by Halloween.

As a part of our tradition today, we remember the people in our church community who have left this earthly life and entered into the Kingdom within the past year. We pause to remember them and to show gratitude for the ways they impacted our own lives.

But there's more. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer says All Saints Day stands for “the unity of Christians of all ages, countries, and races in Christ, and the perfection of that unity in heaven.” I like that. That this isn't just about the souls we have known, it's about all Christians all around the world, who now share together in glory.

In today's passage we read from the first part of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. The Ephesians needed some basic themes about their newfound faith to be explained. Paul wanted to share about what it means to be a community – a diverse family of God, together as Jews and Gentiles, young and old, male and female. He also wanted to encourage them for their faithfulness. Especially because it was really hard and truly foreign for this group of people to be worshiping the same God, together; to be eating meals together; to be reading and learning and praying together. This too was about the unity of Christians.

Paul gives thanks for each and every one of the members of the church in Ephesus. He had heard about their faith and their love for all God's people and he shares that their faith was evidence of their participation in what God was doing on earth.

Just like the flowers that finally sprouted on the walking stick as their own evidence of St. John's faith, the people of Ephesus were showing the world that God was working through them.

David Guzik explains, "Faith and love do not earn us participation in this great work of God. They are evidence of our participation in God's plan."

Do you believe this? That we can participate in God's plan? That you are called to step into what God is already doing?

Do you believe that the things you do and the words you say serve as evidence that God is working in your life?

Brothers and sisters, there is nothing God wants more from you! For you to go from this place – after praising God, confessing, being assured of your forgiveness, and hearing how Scripture applies to you, yes you....to be fueled, motivated, encouraged, and even shaken up so that you will go to your home, your neighborhood, your workplace, your city, your world....and be evidence of God's love to those around you.

I spent years struggling with that word "calling." I didn't believe I had anything to offer. But here I am, preaching. At the age of 17, the last thing I thought God was calling me to do was preach. In fact, I sat on my hands.....Oh, but that's a whole other sermon....and if you want to chat with me about it sometime, I'd love to meet you for lunch or coffee or just share a meal with you and your family. Because let me tell you – I would have overlooked this passage in a heartbeat before I understood what it was all about.

So, back to Paul. Paul gives thanks for the people in the Ephesian church, but he also says he knows about their love for all the saints.

The saints: those who have already died, who are now experiencing the gift of eternal life. For us, we may think of famous well-known saints like Joan of Arc, Saint Patrick, or one of the most recently named saints, St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But when Paul was writing this letter, he was referring to earliest of martyrs – people like Stephen, who was stoned to death after speaking about Jesus as the prophesied Messiah before the Sanhedrin.

I think Paul's letter also refers to each and every one of you. All the saints includes us.

That's right. Scholar Charles Stone argues "... as far as the Lord is concerned, you are all saints if you love Him and follow Him. It's not a special category for super Christians. It's a common title for those who love the Lord and believe in Him."

So in this letter, this prayer, Paul gives thanks for the work God is doing among the Ephesians and for the work that continues on through us and in us.

We have inherited that work, that faith, and that love. The same hope the earliest church in Ephesus had? Yes, that...that is what we have inherited. And that's what he means when he writes about the riches of the glory of the inheritance from God.

It's the same inheritance that Moses speaks about before the Israelites cross the Jordan. You can read in Deuteronomy 32 where Moses says

Remember the days of old;

    consider the generations long past.

When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance...

    For the Lord's portion is his people,

        Jacob his allotted inheritance.

These words from Moses, echoed in the prayer of Paul, remind us that God's true desire is to be at the center of our lives...just like the temple for the Israelites, so is Christ to be for us. Our inheritance has been given to us through the generations – from those first desert-wandering Hebrews to the unrelenting prophets, the first disciples, the first Christ-followers, the first martyrs, even the first desert monks. And that continues down through the ages to those Sunday school teachers and camp counselors, grandparents and coaches who loved us and taught us and shared their own faith with us.

You see, this is about the faith of people over centuries.

Faith that got people over high mountains and through deep valleys.

Faith that encouraged hours of Sunday School lesson preparation.

Faith that gave them endurance through cancer treatments.

Faith that led them to speak the name of Jesus Christ as they were burned, stoned, beheaded, hung, beaten.

Faith that watered a dry stick for 3 years.

Faith that we have inherited.

Faith that also gives us power.

The same power the Hebrews knew as they walked through the Red Sea. The same power that made the walls of Jericho fall to the ground. The same power that calmed the sea, healed the leper, and changed the water into wine. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is waiting to be used in and through us.

You see, this passage isn't just about remembering the people in Ephesus or the people who have impacted our own faith and life. This is about the power of God that is just waiting for us – for us to see it and plug in to it so that we can share God's love more and more in our broken world.

One of my favorite writers, Henri Nouwen says, "Saints are people who make the living Christ visible to us in a special way."

What is the special way you are called to make the living Christ visible to those around you? You have the power to do it. You have the community to surround you. You have a pastor who will pray with you and for you. You have the faith of the saints over the centuries to spur you on and give you the tools to share love, feed the hungry, nurture the forgotten, see the rejected, heal the brokenhearted.

So if you feel like you are standing still holding a dried up walking stick, the words of Paul today are saying, "Plant it. And start walking.....go get that water, bring it back, and water that stick until something miraculous happens."

I don't know what that dry walking stick looks like for you....

Relationship, Forgiveness, Dream like thrift store in Sharpsburg?

But let's leave this place ready and willing and full of faith as we put those walking sticks in the ground and start the work of obedience, faith, and relying on the power of God to make miracles happen. Just like the saints have done over the centuries, we too are called to help make Christ evident to others through us in mighty and powerful ways.