

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 4, 2012
All Saints Sunday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Chronicles 6:18-21
Psalm 149
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 5:1-12

Today is that special day in the life of the church when we remember those who have preceded us in the life of faith. We recall their lives as examples of courage and faithfulness, and we celebrate the heavenly hope to which they aspired.

In doing so, we find ourselves linked with them as sharers of a common destiny and hope. And, in the liturgy, we join our worship with their ongoing worship and praise around the throne of God, celebrating together the grace of God in our lives.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this relationship in today's epistle lesson using the image of an inheritance. He prays for the Ephesians, that they might know the hope to which they have been called, and that they might know what a rich and glorious inheritance God has given to his people (v. 18).

Now I like how the KJV and the Amplified Version render this verse: "how rich is God's glorious inheritance in the saints."

Did you catch that? It's as though Paul is saying that the content of the inheritance is in the lives of the saints. There is a vast depository of blessing and wisdom and encouragement -- a "spiritual inheritance" -- available to us in the lives of those who have preceded us.

Now ordinarily we might think of an inheritance in terms of money, or property and possessions, or valuable family heirlooms. But the inheritance Paul speaks of here is an inheritance focused on *people and relationships*. And it's worth more than all the gold in Fort Knox.

All Saints Day was also a happy occasion for John Wesley. In his Journal entry for November 1, 1756, he writes: "November 1 was a day of triumphant joy, as All Saints Day generally is. How superstitious are they who scruple giving God thanks for the lives and deaths of his saints!"

All Saints was a joyous occasion for Wesley because he realized that through this time we encounter deeply and profoundly what it means to be the Church -- the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church which is one body in Jesus Christ. We are not "self made" Christians. We are not little "islands" unto ourselves. Our lives are deeply and intimately linked together with those who've gone before whether we like to admit it or not. Those who have gone before have sacrificed greatly in order for us to be here worshipping this morning.

For those who may be unfamiliar with All Saints or who have never celebrated it before, let me give you a brief history.

As the early church grew and believers died, the church sought a way to give thanks for the lives of martyrs and others who had died victoriously in the faith. In some churches where persons had been martyred, it was often customary to gather for a communion service at the martyr's tomb. The tomb was often used as a communion table!

Later, churches were sometimes built over these sites, beginning the practice of naming churches in honor of special saints.

All Saints was originally observed during the Easter season, probably in commemoration of the resurrection. But somewhere around 835 A.D., Pope Gregory moved the date to November 1. There may have been several factors behind this, but one in particular is worth noting today.

For centuries, the end of October and Halloween have commemorated the time of year when it was believed that the spirits of the dead returned to life again and caused havoc in the lives of others. As we know, all kinds of rituals surrounding Halloween have developed. Some may be harmless, but others are actually full-blown celebrations of the occult and the powers of evil.

By moving All Saints to November 1, the Church issued a powerful witness and testimony to the triumph of good over evil, the Reign of God over the powers of darkness, the defeat of the powers of death and hell by the power of God.

All Saints is joyous, then, and it is important to us because we are connected to those who have preceded us. As many of our hymns this morning remind us, we continue in their stead. We carry on their work and their testimony to the Kingdom of God and to its presence in the world.

As we remember and give thanks for their lives, we do so with the awareness that they have passed the baton on to us. They are now at rest -- but we are still all in this together. They *began* the song of praise; it is now our turn to *continue* it.

And so today we look backward as well as forward. And we pray for grace - - that we might live our lives as faithfully as they lived theirs. That we may love as deeply as they loved. That we may serve as enthusiastically as they served. That we may give as sacrificially as they gave.

And we look forward to the day when we join them around the throne of God, where we will sing the song of praise that never ends.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.