

*From the Pastor Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Schooley's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, November 6, 2022 - All Saints (observed)*

Death has many faces, many manifestations. There is, of course, the obvious death in which key bodily functions cease, specifically either circulatory/respiratory cessation or brain cessation. Because we're Americans and we love polity and legislation, there's even something called the Uniform Determination of Death Act, which is a model state law created in 1981 and since adopted by 37 states, including Ohio and Michigan. So, if someone tells you you're dead here in Ohio, you're going to have to go to Kentucky to get a second opinion, not Michigan.

But beyond physiological death, we often talk about other existential events as deaths. Divorce or the ending of an intimate relationship is a manifestation of death. Losing someone to a slow, debilitating disease – maybe most especially dementia – is often anecdotally understood as a type of death. And while we may be straying into the metaphorical here, there is an interesting body of knowledge in therapeutic circles that insist that maybe it's more than a metaphor. It is not, for example, uncommon to have a counselor ask you after any significant life change, "Have you mourned that?" As someone who has been on the receiving end of that question, it can be a little jarring. I mean, one second we were talking about my losing a job and the next we're talking about mourning? But, again, increasingly it is a fair question because major changes do not and cannot occur without one thing fully and truly ending. Your youngest child leaves the house and the home you knew no longer exists and – very likely – will never exist again. "Death" seems like an accurate word for that, while "mourning" would be the necessary response.

We begin with death because today is All Saints Day – a day that has been celebrated by Christians of most every stripe since at least the ninth century. Originally,

the Church set aside key Sundays to remember specific martyrs, but as Christian history grew – and with it the number of martyrs – the Church soon faced a logistical challenge because nearly every Sunday was just one more martyr to remember. And so, a day for all the saints was created as a way of teaching us how to remember, how to mourn, and how to hope.

Of course, since most of you are Americans, this is not going to be a fun day because American culture around death is one of denial. To wit: According to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, only 37-percent of Americans have given a great deal of thought to their own death and end-of-life-wishes, while 27-percent have given no thought at all to these things. Those numbers are discouraging because I'm willing to bet that 99.9999-percent of all people know they're going to die. And, anecdotally, I can tell you that as a pastor, one of the worst parts of death is sitting with grieving adult children as they realize that in the 84 years of their mother or father's life, they never once wrote down even something as small as what hymn they would want in their funeral.

Some of our death denial is a result of living in a country with such high medical advancements and achievements. In a society where *every day*, on average, 113 people receive a life-saving organ transplant, it makes sense that we trust in medicine. The downside to this, of course, is that when we do still die – as even those transplant recipients will eventually – it feels less like the inevitable outcome of living and more like a medical failure. And this is not insignificant to your Christian identity and your Christian discipleship because holding even a subconscious sense of "failure" *and* holding onto the hope of the resurrection at the same time is really, really difficult. "Failure" and "hope" do not make good bedfellows.

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And yet, maybe precisely for this reason, All Saints Day is an important, not-to-be-missed-nor-neglected liturgical day. For today is an opportunity to shrug off our inherited cultural biases and baggage in favor of the inheritance offered to us in Christ Jesus. This is, at any rate, what Paul is speaking to us today in that passage from Ephesians.

Now, if you were at my Installation Service on Tuesday, you've already heard my good friend and utter wunderkind, Rev. Gavin Walton, tackle this dense passage. So you know that there are layers and layers to Ephesians 1. What I wish, then, to draw our attention to is Paul's repeated use of "inheritance" throughout this passage as this word occurs three times in twelve verses. Indeed, it is in the thesis statement of this reading – "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance." That's where Paul begins us. And reasonably speaking, if we have an inheritance it is only because someone has died. Gavin explained the bitter-sweetness of this inheritance quite well, though he held back his own personal experience of it (likely because he did not want to make that service about himself). But as I noted just a few weeks back, Gavin lost his mother to her battle with cancer about four years ago. He and his sister, Autumn, received an inheritance from her passing. But then – suddenly and tragically – his sister died not too many months later, even before the final legal papers on their mother's inheritance had been signed, and so Gavin became the inheritor of Autumn's estate as well – an estate that consisted exclusively of their mother's passed on inheritance and Autumn's little dog. Bittersweet does not begin to do this experience service.

That sort of twin loss, of course, is enough to strike a lesser man lame. So how did and does Gavin persist – even to the point of being able to deliver a stirring sermon on All Saints Day because that's

what his friend asked of him? He persists because of this inheritance that Paul speaks of – an inheritance born of the death of Christ. It is because our Lord died that we have received an inheritance. And the pledge – or proof – of the validity and veracity of this inheritance is that we have received the Holy Spirit to lead and comfort, to correct and guide. In the death of Christ, we lost God's presence with us, but in the sending of the Spirit, we received once again God's presence in our lives. Is it the same presence? Yes and no. The Spirit is fully God, but the Spirit is *not* the same sort of presence as having the fully human, incarnation of God bodily present with us. As such, the Spirit stands in as a pledge to someday, once again, sharing in that bodily presence with God. And we have such hope because our God not only died – and by doing so gave us an inheritance – but because our God also rose up from the grave, conquering death once and for all. It is Gavin's faith and trust in the truth of this that is, as Paul writes, "the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe." It is this power that allows Gavin to persist on a day when he might otherwise, reasonably, just want to stay in bed and deny everything.

This power, of course, is available to all of us, not just wunderkinds like Gavin. And, more specifically, this is the power of Christ's resurrection *and* His ascension to the right hand of God from whence, as the Apostles Creed reminds us, He comes to judge the quick and the dead – that is, from whence (in Paul's words) Christ sits "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion." There is no power – not even the power of a death-denying culture, not even the power of a sense of medical failure, not even the power of your own experience of death and mourning – that is greater than this power of resurrection.

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Well, all of this is necessary backdrop if we are to understand and appreciate Luke's version of Jesus' Beatitudes. And just for a moment, consider again that gospel lesson. Consider that Jesus begins by talking to people about being poor, hungry, sad, and socially outcast. That's a terrible life circumstance! Privileged as the majority of us are, I doubt that we've experienced all four of those phenomena at once. Maybe two, possibly three, at once, but almost without doubt not all four. Yet this is, apparently, the life situation of Jesus' original audience. And, of course, because Jesus loves us, He addresses those in this life situation with love and grace and hope. He motivates and affirms. But He doesn't stop there, for the passage we read ends with a series of particularly difficult ethical demands on his audience. At the end of our reading we hear that these poor, hungry, sad, and socially ostracized people are still supposed to love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them, pray for those who abuse them. They are to take a strike on one cheek as an opportunity to present the other cheek for an additional strike. They are to give away what scant few possessions they have and try not to get back any possessions that have been taken from them. In fact, if someone takes from them, they're supposed to find that person and give them *more* of their stuff!

As we consider those ethical demands, let us take Jesus seriously enough to believe that He actually means all of this. And if we do, we will be left with only one possible opinion: "Well, that's not very nice!" It is not – by our social conventions of politeness – nice to ask someone who has already been hurt to be open to yet more pain, to demand that someone who has lost so much, to lose still more, to look at Gavin and say, "You've lost your mother, but have you considered also losing your little sister."

That is vulgar! Our social conventions train us to try to provide a little relief, a little respite, to those who have suffered. Our sense of compassion wants to do this as well. Yet here is Jesus fully recognizing the poor, hungry, sad, and lonely existences of those who are listening to Him and then still turning around and making demands on their lives.

On what basis can our Lord possibly do this? Well, on the basis of the power that we have inherited as those who believe in Him. Like an inheritance of an immense estate that takes days and days of sitting with attorneys to sign for and receive, we have been gifted an inheritance larger than we typically fathom. We have pools of resources that we don't even know about. We have wells of resiliency that we haven't even yet tapped. In our ignorance to this reality, we can grow insecure, but the reality of our existence is still bright enough, rich enough to be asked to give even out of our poverty. *That* is what we remember and celebrate on All Saints Day. *That* is why we resist the death-denying impulses of our culture in favor of the death-conquering reality of Christ. And when it feels like other powers – the powers of wealth or influence, of celebrity or renown, of violence and even death itself – seem to be in control of the world, we remember that all these powers have been placed under the feet of our Lord and, to the degree that we are also "the fullness of Him," placed under our feet as well.

Finally, it would be obtuse of me to not recognize that today is two days before a significant midterm election in our country. Significant – I should be clear – *not* because any reasonable person would think that Tuesday's results will either usher in God's Kingdom or seal us off from it entirely, but significant because by Wednesday morning there is going to be half of this country in jubilation, while the other half will feel like

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death. I won't presume anything about any one of you specifically, but my general sense is that this church has some values that we wish to see be spread more widely than just in our community together. And if current polling – slippery little weasel that polling can be – is any indication, Wednesday morning may feel like death to many of you. It may feel like a day when some counselor will say to you “Have you mourned that yet?” And if this is the case, I hope that you return to today's lessons from Paul and your Lord. I hope you remember the inheritance you have already received. I hope that you remember that even the *victors* in Tuesday's election are but powers already under the feet of your Lord and, to the degree that you are also “the fullness of Him,” under your feet as well. And I hope that in remembering all this, the Spirit – the pledge of our ultimate inheritance – will confront you and comfort you, so that you can go back out into the world ready, willing, and able to love thy enemies and continue to persist in doing to others as you would have them do to you.

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