

A WISE AND JOYFUL INHERITANCE

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Text: Ephesians 1:11–23

Sometimes, when I need a break from sitting at my desk or looking at a computer screen, I get up and walk around the church. On occasion, I walk through the hall that leads to the sanctuary. Without fail, I find myself staring at the historical photographs of Plymouth members, ministers, and important milestones in the life of the church throughout the years. When I look at those faces of our spiritual forebears, I can't help but wonder what they would think of us and what we are doing. Are we anything like what they dreamed or envisioned? Are we keeping faith with God in ways that sustain and prosper the church God first made possible through their call to plant it?

As I was preparing to begin my tenure here, I remember reading Dave Kenney's assertion in the Plymouth Church 150th-anniversary book that "by the early twenty-first century, Plymouth Congregational Church bore little resemblance to the tiny house of worship that had opened its doors at Fourth and Nicollet one hundred and fifty years earlier." And while it is to be expected that we will have evolved well beyond what our forebears could have possibly imagined, when I look at those faces, when I see the previous ministers staring back at me, when I read the names of those who played such a critical role in who we are today, I am anxious to be worthy, not so much of their dreams or even their judgments, but of the immortal gift they bequeathed to us, the work and witness that survives them: this church.

As we observe All Saints' and All Souls' Day, when we honor the saints and martyrs of the faith and the faithfully departed known and unknown to us, I am constantly reminded how important it is to pause and remember the work and witness of our spiritual forebears. Although we live in times that may differ from theirs, we are who we are because of who they were. But this day of remembrance allows us to take a longer view of our place in God's work in the world. As the late Rev. Peter Gomes, famed minister of Harvard's Memorial Church, mused, "the present-centeredness of the church may be its most consistent heresy." And I suspect that the present-centeredness of today's church causes us to wrestle with self-definition, hoping anxiously to articulate a compelling case for the institutional church, which is becoming increasingly unpopular and distrusted. The church, local and universal, is figuring out what it is exactly we should be. In every tradition, the faithful are asking what the church is for. What role does the church play in a world that increasingly ignores, rejects, and distrusts religion? What is the purpose of the church?

That appears to be the issue bedeviling the church in Ephesus. While scholars believe the Apostle Paul may not have penned this letter, and we don't know the specific problems and questions to which the author was responding, the Ephesian church appears to be experiencing what some theologians describe as "a crisis of hope" (Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard). They had lost sight of their purpose. And when we look at the environment in which Christians were trying to be the church in the city of Ephesus, we can sympathize with their struggle. They were trying to be the church in the fourth-largest city in the Roman Empire, a large commercial trading center that also was the location of the pagan temple of the Greek goddess Artemis, who, no doubt, was feted by a steady stream of pilgrims. Who are they in the middle of a bustling, distracted, and choice-filled world? What do they have to offer the world?

Paul wastes no time disabusing the Ephesians of their doubt and concern about who they are as the church. The church is not the product of a transactional exchange with a mythological god nor a whim of an imperial system seeking to exert and maintain control over vulnerable people. No, Paul declares they have received an inheritance in Jesus Christ—a wise and joyous inheritance that should elicit within them praise. They are the church, an essential, integral part of God’s pre-existing plan to reclaim and redeem God’s good creation. The Holy Spirit marked them as the holders, bearers, and witnesses to this expression of God’s movement in the world in the form of the church. They had been chosen and adopted through the redemptive work of Jesus, bringing “unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph 1:10). Paul prays that when there is doubt about who and whose they are, remember what they have received from God through the life, death, and ministry of Jesus: the hope of God’s call on their lives, the richness of God’s glorious inheritance within God’s people, and God’s power working within them. Hope, richness, and power.

And it’s worth pointing out that the Greek word used here for “riches and richness” has the meaning of fullness, abundance, and plenitude. And Paul is at pains to emphasize to the Ephesians how extravagant this inheritance is, so he uses intentional exaggeration in his choice of words. What we have received from Jesus and its expression in what we call the church is an immeasurably, unspeakably abundant gift, a part of God’s plan to bring all people and all creation back into relationship with God. Later in the letter, as if aware that from time to time the faithful will lose sight of what it means to be the church, he invokes the witness of the faithful saints who joined Jesus in the work of being church, “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19). So this is not a time to doubt the call to be the church. Praise God’s glory for that divine wisdom and revelation that made the church.

So, when you look at the faces of the people in the pictures, know that they were planted here as a church, a wise and joyful inheritance in Jesus, an essential part of God’s work in the world. Our forebears received God’s spirit of revelation and knowledge and expressed it in their founding and serving in this church. Their witness to us is this church. This is our inheritance. So today is a good day to think critically about what church our forebears bequeathed us and what church God gifted us. Knowing that the church we inherited is an essential part of God’s plan of reconciliation is not an invitation to arrogance or misguided Christian nationalism that menaces our nation today. It would be a mistake for the church to assume that it is a unique expression of an old idea or that its current iteration is outside the biblical or historical tradition . . . or that the church’s mission and mandate from God are no less powerful and prophetic than when it was formed in the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit or when the first Plymouthites covenanted together.

Instead, we accept this inheritance as a reminder that we are incorporated in God’s plan of redemption and reconciliation. We now are the holders, bearers, and witnesses of the truest expression of God’s movement in the world. I’m not inviting us to try to figure out what our forebears think about the building, endowments, or programming. I ask us to honor them by being the church God first called them to be . . . that, although we may be mortal and those who preceded us have become ancestors joining the cloud of witnesses who surround us, we are the evidence of the immortality of the community of faith, the wise and joyful inheritance of a people faithful and true, entrusted with God’s gift of hope, richness, and power to be witnesses to God’s deeds of power. In these times of chaos and uncertainty, we can tap into that hope, richness, and power to be the church that the world needs today. In a world filled with choices of gods and distractions, big and small, that rob God’s beloved of their worth and dignity, we may just be the means by which others may come to know the breadth, length, height, and depth of God’s extravagant love. We are not spectators or bystanders in the world, but we confidently embrace what we have received, knowing

there is a “power at work within us [that makes us] able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20). We may not resemble the church our spiritual forebears built or bequeathed us. Still, we remain inheritors of God’s revelation and wisdom: God’s church, a wise and joyous inheritance, indeed! Amen.