

“Hope, Riches, Greatness”
November 7, 2021

Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 8:20-26

This morning we remember and give thanks to God for the lives of Margaret Loughry, David Carew, and Bill Williams—members of the Congregational Church who died in the past year. We add to that list Mary Heininger, who was so important to the life of our congregation when her husband, Ed, was the minister here, and whose affection for and service to this congregation were deep and long-lasting. We give thanks for their lives because in their time and in their ways they joined with us and with others in seeking to make this world a little more like God’s just and loving and merciful realm. We give thanks that their lives were a part of our lives.

No doubt, on this day you are also remembering and giving thanks for many others—that great cloud of witnesses—whose lives have touched and shaped your own life.

The Letter to the Ephesians was written to the “saints”—a common way in which early Christians spoke of themselves. It didn’t mean that they were exceptional people—other than that they had in some way been seized by the overwhelming love of God shown in Jesus. Since many early manuscripts of the Letter to Ephesians make no reference to Ephesus, but only to the saints, perhaps we can understand that it is addressed not just to ancient people in the dead past but to those of us in the living present as well.

The author of this letter to everyday, living saints wants them—and us—to know some very grand things: “what is the *hope* to which God has called you, what are the *riches* of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable *greatness* of God’s power for us who believe, according to the working of God’s great power.”

If we are to know any or all of these, it will not be from the brilliance of our own intellect or the depth of our emotions. It will come more as an answer to prayer. It will come through a spirit of wisdom and revelation that will enlighten the “eyes of our hearts.”

I know. That’s obscure language. You won’t find that phrase anywhere else in the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures often speak of the heart as the place in the body where understanding is found. In that phrase we hear a prayer that our understanding and our vision might be clear and helpful. They aren’t always, we know that. Even so, we pray—that is to say, we open ourselves to what God is doing in our lives and in our world, even if we don’t always understand it very well or see it very clearly.

What, then, is this *hope* to which God has called us?

Hope always has a future orientation. And the danger in speaking about “hope” on All Saints Sunday is that we will hear the word in the context of remembering those who have died and we will start to think about something called “going to heaven.”

But the Christian hope as we encounter it in scripture really has less to do with where we are going after the death that comes to each of us as it has to do with the New Creation that God is in

the process of making in and through all of us. The hope is both that we *are* a part of this new creation and that we *will be* a part of it as God's future unfolds—in life *and* in death.

Christians affirm that this New Creation began with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who went around saying things like: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the realm of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”

Blessed—that's how we translate that Greek word for “happy.” The word suggests people who are, by no merit of our own, the recipients of God's special gifts. It is a word that says God is for you, not against you.

Do you hear the claim that Jesus makes? It's a promise, not of heaven, but of a reversal of fortune. Jesus doesn't brush the sorrow or the suffering aside. Indeed he takes our sadness and grief most seriously and speaks of a future that God is even now bringing into being. Out of such hope, we can face our own sadness and the suffering of the world.

God is still at work. And, yes, sometimes God's goodness is shown in those terrifying reminders not to be so absolutely certain about riches or fullness or gleeful laughter.

These words of blessing come to us as words of hope. These words encourage us as we work to fulfill the promise of blessing to those who are poor, those who are hungry, and others who weep.

We are God's new creation. This is the hope to which God has called us.

With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we might also know the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints. Unlike hope, in which the *future* comes into the present, an inheritance is a place where the *past* enters the present. Go back and read the first part of this letter on your own this week. As it begins the author tells us “Through Christ we have *obtained* an inheritance.” It is ours now.

Have you received an inheritance? It is somewhat like encountering grace—it comes unearned, freely given, perhaps unexpected or even unwelcomed. What the Christians in Ephesus had inherited, what we have received as well, is the forgiveness of God—the riches of God's grace.

When I talk with people about forgiveness what I often hear is this: Forgiving is hard. *Being forgiven* is hard. Sometimes I think we'd rather not talk about forgiveness because the subject brings up so many incidents of betrayal and guilt and hurt and disappointment—you know, the stuff we'd rather not mention in polite company.

Fortunately, we are Christian congregation and therefore we are not polite company. When we are honest, we know ourselves as sinful people—alienated from God and others and the best in ourselves. Sometimes when we are honest, the astonishing happens and we know ourselves as sinful people *forgiven* by the grace of God.

With the eyes of our hearts enlightened we can begin to see our inheritance among the saints. God is with us, forgiving and making a new creation.

There is, finally, the greatness of God's power—the power of the resurrection.

This is either just empty religious talk or we are confronted here with the central reality of the Christian life.

The power of the resurrection is the ability to act that comes from a faith—perhaps only the size of a mustard seed—that God is bringing about a new creation and we are a part of that work and that creation. And because we are part of God’s new creation, the work that we do continues to matter.

The power of the resurrection is the ability to act because in the resurrection we come to believe that even though this world can at times seem so obviously filled with such evil and injustice, the ultimate direction of creation is toward God’s good purposes for all of life.

The power of the resurrection comes not through our own positive thinking or by our strenuous efforts. This power arises out of God’s vindication of the suffering and death of Jesus in the resurrection, in which we see by faith that even at the moment of great suffering and death, God was at work bringing life—and by that same faith claiming that God continues to bring life out of death, hope out of despair today. This is the power that sets us free to love with abandon, to act even when fear presses in, to draw out the best in ourselves and other people.

We live in the power of the resurrection now. Even now with all of the struggles of living, we recognize that we move from despair to joy, from paralysis to action, from sickness to health, from death to life. The ability to do this comes from the hope and faith that we have because even when the leaves in their brilliant splendor start to fall from the trees against the November skies, we are *Easter* people. We live with the empowering awareness that in Christ God has conquered death and the sin that separates us from God, from one another, and from the best in ourselves.

It is with the eyes of our hearts enlightened to the hope, the inheritance, and the power that we have that we can speak with joy today of the saints of God—people like you and me, like David, Margaret, Bill, and Mary. They are “saints” because they engaged fully in life with all of its possibilities and challenges, taking life as it came to them. They knew illness, the death of loved ones, and difficult times. They also knew the joy of music, the power of love of family and friends, the quiet assurance of faith. That is to say they knew the happiness, the blessedness that Jesus spoke of—in all the senses of that word.

With all the saints, may we discover and continue to know the Hope, Riches, and Greatness of God in our lives.