

Investing the Inheritance

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The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

November 6, 2022 (All Saints Sunday)

Ephesians 1:11-23

In the spirit of All Saints, I would invite those who are able to please rise, and together let us pray the prayer of remembrance that is printed in the bulletin...Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son, Christ our Lord. Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you, through Jesus Christ our Savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit loves and reigns, one God in glory everlasting. Amen. And so we remember Joann Berlin, Owintier Charles, Lois DeSoo, Ann Donahue, John Loughridge, Evelyn McCauley, Marianne Mebane, J. Edward Mitinger, J. Edward Pringle, Robert Stewart, Louise Taylor, Nicholas Thomas, Jeffrey Turner...

Please remember each of the two words – All Saints. All saints. That is, please affirm that we remember all saints. And please remember that that we affirm that all are saints, including you.

First the remembering, then the affirmation.

Less than a mile south on Germantown Avenue there is a lovely church, a stone building of some grace and beauty, at the point where Bethlehem Pike begins. It is a Seventh Day Adventist Church now, but I bet there are a few of us here, or in our number, who remember when it was not that, but our earlier building, the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, which, itself, was the result of several starts and stops, mergers and splits. In 1950 – when the Phillies were swept by the hated Yankees in the World Series – in 1950 and thereabouts, our predecessors determined that we had outgrown that lovely stone building and we made the momentous decision to move here, to this site. Think about that. Think about all the meetings, the pros and cons. Does our future indicate that we will need such a building. How can we leave this beautiful place. How can we afford to move.

How can we afford not to. Some of you will remember that, even vaguely, maybe even having known some of the leaders of that effort. But think about what a momentous decision that was. True, it happened in the one period of American history when our version of Protestantism was growing, a post-World War II boom. But still.

We do not face, some 72 years later, some nearly 175 years after we were first founded, we do not face that same decision. But as I think about legacy, and heritage, and stewardship in this season and on this day, we do face a question similar to the one our bold forbears faced – who are we in this changing time, and who is God calling us to be. Now. And into the future.

Those forbears looked around and realized it was up to them. But they also looked back, to some extent, to their past. We are called to do the same. Here, in this moment, for this church, and more broadly as we discern what it means to live lives of faith in a post-COVID, George Floyd world, where we read and read and read about the decline of religion like ours, where the presumption of religious practice is no longer that. Who are we, and who is God calling us to be.

First, we look back. And we remember. All those who have gone before us. Here. In our own lives. When you do that, when you close your eyes and think for a moment, whose names emerge, whose faces come into clarity? Teachers? Bosses? Coaches? Ministers, even? Family members? For me it's a combination of all of those, people whose integrity or vision or very living made an impact on me. We stand on the shoulders of giants, to be sure. But those giants were ordinary people.

I found a poem, unattributed, called "Quiet Shadows."

"Someone/known/unknown/Mr. and Mrs./ anyone/awakens your heart/reminds you. /you are not/alone/tomorrow/will come/Here are the hands to help your hands./ Here are the hearts beating in time with yours./ The world has saints. They never crow/pick at the ashes before they're cold./ They may not even know/ but you do./ You survive/because you can/and their hands/help make it possible."

We have named names just a minute ago, and we will encounter other names when we go to Widener to see the Souls Shot portraits. But let's take a silent moment now to remember, remember a name, remember a saint...

Our tradition is that we do not pray to the saints. But we do know the power of memory, of remembering. And our tradition reminds us that all are saints, were and are. Just as our forbears down the avenue looked around and realized that they were it, and they were plenty, so we do the same. We think of saints as holy and special and set apart. But that's not what our tradition teaches us, and that is not our reality. "All saints" means just that, that we are the ones God calls, and empowers, and shares gifts and graces. Us.

The late author Frederick Buechner wrote that "In (God's) holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints."

Buechner continues: "Many people think of saints as plaster saints, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil deed their whole lives long. As far as I know, real saints never even come close to characterizing themselves that way...the feet of saints are as much of clay as everybody else's, and their sainthood consists less of what they have done than of what God has for some reason chosen to do through them....saints are essentially life-givers. To be with them is to become more alive."

Perhaps that's a beautiful summation of our calling – to help others become more alive.

Paul writes to the Ephesian church about an inheritance. You'll note that word – "destined" – in the first verse we heard. That's a conversation for another time, Presbyterians and predestination, but what Paul suggests here is that we have a purpose, a calling. We needn't make it up; we receive it as a gift. It's what God does through us. That's the inheritance. Whether it's being a life-giver, helping others to become more alive, or one who helps others simply to survive, we have a calling, a gift, an inheritance. Paul calls it faith, made real in love toward all the saints. There is beautiful language imagery here: the eyes of your heart, the hope to which God has called you, the riches of God's glorious inheritance.

Last week our guest preacher Christopher Holland encouraged us to think about how we share our faith with this generation and the generations to come. Faith, in that case, is not a commodity, a menu of beliefs, a checklist. The inheritance we are called to invest is about relationships, about transformation, about being a life-giving force in the world – our broken, fearful, conflicted world. There are

those who have gone before us who have helped us get to this moment. Saints. And there are those all around us who sustain us in the journey. All saints. We join them, in remembering, in hoping.

As we share the ancient words of the Apostles' Creed together, we give thanks for the communion of saints, those who from their labors rest and those all around us, and claim the calling of sainthood now that we all so surely share...Apostles' Creed...