

## RECEIVING AND SHARING OUR INHERITANCE

### All Saints – Year C: Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

The minister who conducted my father's funeral, 38 years ago tomorrow was a loving and caring man who knew my dad as someone who loved music, conducted orchestras, played a number of orchestral instruments, and sang as both a soloist and chorister in many churches during his lifetime. Unfortunately, in the sermon, the minister indulged his own imagination somewhat concerning what the afterlife would be like for my father, newly promoted as a heavenly musician. I don't mind telling you that this man lost me during his flight of fancy, even though I knew he was attempting to bring comfort to the grieving congregation by infusing our prayers, Scripture, and hymns of hope with a little more certainty. He was not the first minister to reveal his frustration at a funeral with how the Bible resorts to metaphor in referring to the afterlife, and I know that he certainly won't be the last. Some pastors are so personally uncomfortable with the mystery of life and death that they do everything in their power to de-mystify the hereafter. For me, the magnificence of both life and death is its mystery, and I am content to leave the metaphors we have in Holy Scripture as metaphors, recognizing that they speak of a truth we fail in estimating or describing, but also hold sufficient power to affirm our faith in the loving and merciful God who stands at the heart and centre of life, of death, and of life beyond death. The Commendation in our funeral service is an excellent example of the power of metaphor. At the conclusion of the liturgy we pray (using my father's name), "Into your hands, O merciful Saviour, we commend your servant Gordon. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen." (page 283, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*).

But there is certain comfort for those who mourn, and such comfort is found in the grace of faith shared, love shared, and hope shared. Professor Delton Glebe used to teach the students in his Death and Dying course at WLU and later to those who joined bereavement groups in our community, that in time we "bounce back" from the deep sorrow we experience when someone near and dear to us dies. I always felt the term "bounce" was inaccurate: I've never experienced the bounce, nor have I observed it in others. But there is a gradual lightening of our burden of sorrow; eventually the bittersweet memories we carry of happier times lose their bitterness. We may still cry when we remember our loved ones who are no longer with us, but we may be grateful for those tears, because we recognize their value in affirming the preciousness of life; of how we are now entrusted with the privilege and honour of being memory-keepers for those around us; of how deeply connected we remain, even through death. For me, the magnificence of both life and death is its mystery; that in the midst of death, there is life.

In today's Second Reading, Saint Paul writes of our inheritance as those who have been gathered together as the children of God through our faith in Christ. And in this magnificent description of the church as the very body of Christ itself, he teaches of both our blessedness and our call to be a faithful, loving, hope-filled community. He teaches that it is through our witness and our presence that Christ is truly present with healing and forgiveness in our world; that the community of those who believe in Jesus are to be the saving grace of God given for the deep needs of individuals in community and of the community itself; that the gospel itself, its proclamation of faith, its sharing of unconditional love, and its willingness to testify to the hope that lies within us is one of the means of grace. It is not just faith that is held in community, it is the gospel that is our inheritance, an inheritance we must share for Jesus' sake.

Luke's beatitudes address the Christian community as it was in Jesus' day, and as it still is today. There are still those gathered who are poor and rich, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, despised and beloved by others. The community of disciples is not comprised of those who are good or those who are bad: it is a both-and community, and Jesus recognizes that we are all works in progress that need the light of the gospel to break into the darkness within. Sometimes that darkness is sorrow, doubt, and fear. And on this All Saints Sunday, more than ever, Jesus calls us to be the community for which he died and rose; to be people for others; to love our enemies, pray for those who cause us to suffer, turn the other cheek, and give to others what is rightfully ours – not to gain jewels for our eternal crown, but for Jesus,

that the truth for which he died might remain alive in the world; that it might be carried within and among us as children of his light, as people of his way.

It is in sharing what we have inherited, our faith, our hope, and our love that the world is mended and healed, and perhaps even saved. We are God's saints, not because of our holiness – far from it! – but because of our call in Christ to be Christ for one another and for the deep needs of our world.