

“Our Inheritance:
Ephesians 1:15-23

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For the last few weeks at Edgewood we have been in the midst of our Stewardship campaign. We have been invited to reflect on all the important ministries our church does and what it takes to make those ministries happen, from our countless volunteers to our team leaders to the financial gifts that make up our annual budget. We've been talking about our vision for the year 2020 and the next decade, and what kind of resources we will need to sustain and grow that vision. We've named things like funding our Faith Community Nurse and investing in our children and youth programs. Those are important, and I do hope everyone will consider making a pledge towards our campaign next year and bring their pledge cards with them next Sunday, but there are aspects of Edgewood United Church and what makes it so special that can't be quantified in staff hours or salaries or hours spent in service or how many kids we teach in Church School.

We are first and foremost drawn here because of and for a connection to God. At our foundation each of us is here because we yearn to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. We live it out every day by following the ministry of Jesus - by committing to justice and peace in all that we do. And we lean into this connection in our most painful, grief-filled moments by remembering that through Christ life and love will always conquer death. We don't always have the right language to describe these beliefs and feelings, but we come here because we yearn for connection. With God. With community. With Creation.

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, of which we read a short excerpt together, reminds us of this shared faith. This letter to the church in Ephesus. It's an early Christian church but they are

also one of the first generations of church folks that didn't personally know Jesus in the flesh so they are struggling with how they are supposed to follow him, both as a community and as individuals. The next chapters of Ephesians are full of wisdom, admonitions, and instructions for how the church should Be The Church. They are told how to get along with each other. They are told how to live an upright and proper lifestyle. They are chastised for their shortcomings and arguments in attempts to inspire them to rise above it and strengthen their faith community. Basically if there is an opinion to be shared, Paul makes sure to share it in this letter.

But before that all begins, he starts by laying a foundation of gratitude and devotion to God through Christ. He reminds this church that in all their imperfections and questions and hesitations, they are still blessed by God and that they have been called for a particular purpose. He reminds the church that Christ's power is glorious and that by following Christ they are following someone who is above and beyond any worldly power or politician - the way they are connected through faith surpasses the rule and authority and power and dominion of even the most powerful and fearsome of rulers, not just from their moment in time, but for all the time to come. For us we can read that and take courage that even today when the most corrupt or incompetent or hateful of humans is in power, Christ's liberating love is still more powerful.

This is an important reminder for me today as we envision the future of our church and as we orient new members to our community. We start with God. We start with connection. And from there all other things flow. This explains why the heart of our church is our sanctuary. This space was painstakingly and beautifully designed by our church founders. The sanctuary's sole purpose is to provide a place for the community to gather, connect, and give praise to God. There is no kitchen in this part of the church. There is no resource closet or business conference room. It was designed for worship. We sit in the round so that no one person in front is the focus of

everyone's attention and so that we can feel the unifying power of the community around us. This is not a sanctuary where you can hide - no matter where you sit you are part of the larger group where you will inevitably make awkward eye contact with someone across the sanctuary from you, reminding you that you are not alone, that you are a part of things.

The décor, the colors, the acoustics, the stained glass, the open portal to the heavens, all serve to connect us with God and invite us into a spirit of prayer and praise. This is our gathering place. There is where each week we reconnect, we lift up our heartaches and joys, we sing and sit in silence, all while trying to listen to where God is calling us in this time and place. Where Paul uses words to express his devotion to God, we use our worship - our movements, our bodies, our voices, and this sacred space, to express the same things.

Like the early church in Ephesus, we begin with our connection or longing for connection with God. From there flows community. I love that in Paul's letter he describes the people who make up the church community as saints. He uses this liberally - he is not just talking about people who have died, but he includes everyone, every one of us. Whoever is working on behalf of Christ's love and justice, however imperfectly, is included in the cast of saints. It is a marker of faith and hope, of an inheritance through Christ's grace, not a title that you have to jump through hoops to earn. In this way Paul sets apart the members of the church and helps them to claim their unique role as members of their faith community.

He is reminding them that every person is capable of impacting the people around them and making a difference, both in their church and in ministry on behalf of their church. And it is this that I think is so important to remember when we talk about the value of the church and what it takes to build the church: we can never fully understand the richness and impact each person that walks into this sanctuary has on the church, or the way it is different when they are gone.

This is true for a person who visits Edgewood once but ultimately decides this is not their church home: we'll never know the impact a conversation they might have had, or the way they boosted someone who saw them from afar and recognized something of themselves in their fashion, or their age, or the way they carried themselves. That one time visitor is a saint of the church.

This is true for the person who comes on Sunday mornings faithfully but doesn't have the time to participate in other aspects of the church or who keeps a distance because of or shyness or hesitation about where they fit in. The voice they add to worship, the comfort they offer beside someone, the prayers they quietly lift up on behalf of someone else, transforms the spirit of this space. The faithful Sunday worshipper is a saint of the church.

The ones who bring their children as often as possible but find that dance competitions, and play rehearsals, and plain exhaustion on Sunday morning keep them away more than they like are saints of the church, both parents and children. Because when they are here their family fills this space with joy, laughter, energy, and unpredictable Holy Spirit awesomeness. And when they are away, the community stays connected through prayers and hopes of wellness and peace for these families, for these saints.

And our folks who come alone. Because they are single. Because they are divorced. Because they are widowed. Because they have a partner with a different religion or no religion at all. Because they like coming alone and being a part of something big and holy - of reminding each other that we are all one person, one small part of the whole. These are the ones who are quick to smile at someone sitting by themselves, who form fast, deep friendships with the people around them, and who are involved in every ministry in every corner of the church. These are saints of the church.

When we talk about the saints of the church, it extends beyond budgets and supply lists and electric bills and campaigns. You all - you saints - are the ones who build the bridge from earth to heaven each week, drawing our community closer to the kingdom of God with your presence, with your service, and with your faith. It can't be quantified. It can't be captured in a letter or even a sermon. But it's what makes this place so special.

Church often feels like a miracle to me. The fact that so many of us from so many different backgrounds and ages and beliefs come together and find something in common. We don't live in the same neighborhood. We don't shop at the same stores or eat at the same restaurants. We don't all vote the same way. The only thing we have in common is a yearning for connection - with God and with community, and from there everything flows and fits and forms into something wonderful. From our common longing for connection we do advocacy work, we provide education experiences, we eat together and feed our neighbors, we laugh and cry and visit each other and show up in more ways than we can count. We do the work of being saints. Imperfectly. Figuring it out as we go along. Trusting that in the mistakes will be a foundation of love and forgiveness. Being a faith community.

This is our inheritance. It began with Christ's example of radical, life changing love. And it has been passed on through the generations. It has moved from church to church, sometimes taking new forms or reshaping to meet a particular community. 66 years ago it took root in this particular corner of East Lansing through our founders, and all of us who are gathered here today or who have Edgewood in their heart are recipients of that inheritance. Ours is a ministry of connection with God at the heart of all that we do, a ministry of connection with community. On this All Saints Day I am thankful for every saint that came before us, and every saint that is still living, knowing that we wouldn't be the church, we wouldn't be *this* church, without you.