

Sermon: We Remember Them
Text: Ephesians 3:18-21
Date: November 4, 2018
Context: WWPC
All Saints Sunday
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I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints . . . the love of Christ . . . so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:18

Today is the third Sunday of our Stewardship season, and our theme for today is the Stewardship of our Inheritance.

By which I mean, what gifts have our foremothers and forefathers in the faith passed down to us?

What gifts have our mentors, our teachers, our predecessors in the faith, passed down to us? How do we benefit from these gifts, and how might we put them to use in building out the reign of God on earth?

Or to echo the passage I just read, what gifts have the saints that have gone before us passed down to us that enable us to comprehend the breadth, length, height and depth of God's love, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God?

Some people might find this question to be a bit tricky. First, because there is a pervasive suspicion about saints floating around out there.

But even more than that, because there is pervasive belief in certain Christian circles, such as the one I grew up in, that God has no grandchildren.

In case it's not clear what this means, the idea here is that every individual must make a decision for Christ on his or her own. Your mother can't do it for you, nor can your grandmother, nor your Sunday school teacher and so on.

God only has children, not grandchildren, and you become a child of God the moment you are born again.

On this view accepting Jesus as your personal savior is a bit like taking your first breath. That's the moment you truly become a viable member of the family of faith.

This theory about how one comes to faith is a central theological pillar in thousands of churches across the country, and I have no wish, and even less right, to try to undermine the integrity of that pillar.

But I personally believe that the way one comes to faith is more complex than that. Or at least the idea that we must make an individual decision for Christ does not capture the full breadth of how people come to our great faith.

I believe this because I have seen with my own eyes that faith is something that is, in fact, passed down from one generation to the next.

On this view coming faith is less something you do, like taking your first breath, and more something you inherit, like having your mother's nose or your father's chin.

Just to cite one quick example: think of all the children of ministers who go on to be ministers themselves. This happens all the time, even in families of died-in-the-wool Presbyterians who don't necessarily run in born again circles.

My guess is that this might also be true of you, too. You're here today because your mother or father preceded you in the pews.

Then, once you came along, she or he made sure you were sitting next to them every Sunday. Now, all these years later, you are here today because they were here before you.

Of course it goes the other way too. Faith is something that is passed on, yes, but then it has to be accepted, received, as it were. And then it has to be practiced.

And in some cases that doesn't happen. The faith that is extended to you by your forebears, might not be your faith. That was true for me, at least in part.

I had to find my adult faith on my own. In the end, when it comes to the central tenets of the Christian faith, I did make a personal decision about what I believe and do not believe.

But that was made easier because my parents laid a strong foundation for me as a child.

I sat next to my mother and father in the pew every Sunday. They also made sure I sat around the table in my Sunday school classroom every Sunday, too. So I grew up hearing about Moses and David and Mary and Jesus.

I did not inherit my mother's beautiful singing voice, but I learned how to sing hymns from the hymnal from her. Hymns about God's great faithfulness, summer and winter, and springtime and harvest, and I can still sing a few of those hymns by heart.

My father invoked God's blessing on our meals. *Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed, and make us ever mindful of the needs of others.*

These are some of the first words I ever learned, and they are down as deep in my soul as it's possible to be.

And my mother taught me to pray before I went to sleep at night. A practice I maintain to this day, always giving thanks for at least two things from any given day before I drift away into dreamland.

So I learned the basics of the faith, the fundamentals, as it were, from my parents when I was a child.

I definitely accepted Jesus as my personal savior, even if I later came to realize that I was not done being born again.

And even if it still sometimes feels like I am being born again, or that I need to be, I got off to a good start in that direction as a child.

That was my inheritance. My parents were neither pastors nor Presbyterians, but here I am, in no small part, because of them, preaching the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ every week.

Recently I came across the story of a man who brilliantly brought this idea of inheritance to light for me.

He happens to be from Pittsburgh, the site of last Saturday's tragic shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue. If you were here last Sunday, you'll recall that we began our service the next day by reading the names of the victims.

We did this because in the Jewish tradition, naming the ones who have gone before us is not only the best way to remember them, it's a way of keeping their legacies alive, of remembering what they taught us by their example, so that we might follow that example.

Pittsburgh has remained on our minds this week as the services began for those victims. But even before all of this happened, I knew I was going to draw on the story of this kind, sweet-hearted man from Pittsburgh for this sermon.

This particular man believed, in his own words, "that love is at the root of everything [good], all learning, all parenting, all relationships [that are good and healthy]."

He believed that love is at the root of all of it. And that love is what the world needs now, love, sweet love.

He also happened to be an ordained Presbyterian minister. For most of his career he was a household name, known all across this country. To my knowledge he is the only Presbyterian minister to reach such a lofty height.

But he did not rise to fame due to his soaring oratorical skills, his gifts as a preacher. He rose to fame by testing out a question that was both audacious and lovely.

He wondered what it would look like if he took Jesus's command to love your neighbor as yourself, and to make a TV show out of it geared specifically to children, so that they might learn about that love during their formative years.

And then broadcast that show nationwide. So that's what he did, and that's when Mr. Roger's Neighborhood was born.

The show should never have succeeded. The sets were hokey, and the production values minimal even by the standards of that day. Just a bunch of sock puppets and what look like cardboard props.

But when one of his producers suggested that they take the show on the road, the lines to get in were blocks long. Black kids, white kids, rich kids, poor kids, inner city kids, suburban kids all lined up by the hundreds to see Mr. Rogers.

All of these kids were brought together by the force of one man, a man who wore cardigan sweaters and generic sneakers that looked like he got them at Sears.

But every week he promised the children who were watching him at home that he liked them just the way they are. He assured them that they were unique, that there was no one else just like them, and so they deserved to be loved because they truly were special.

The television neighborhood Mr. Rogers created was make believe, but it wasn't strictly fantasy.

It was a place where real conflict happened. Where the puppet king -- King Friday -- once wanted to build a wall to keep change from happening.

Where, at a time in our country when race riots were breaking out in America's streets, a white man and a black man sat, soaking their feet together in a little backyard wading pool.

Where the little aquarium fish that Mr. Rogers fed every day sometimes died, and no one tried to hide the reality of these deaths. Indeed, the little fish were often buried right on set, helping to teach children about one of life's hardest lessons.

Because of his fame, Fred Rogers was often asked to deliver commencement speeches. In his final address, delivered, I believe at Princeton Theological Seminary, the Rev. Fred Rogers took in his audience of newly minted ministers-to-be and this is what he said:

Ever since you were very small there was someone who smiled you into smiling. There was someone that talked you into talking. That sung you into singing. That loved you into loving.

On this All Saints Sunday, I suspect that there was also someone who believed you into believing, that prayed you into praying.

And I am almost certain that there was someone in your life, somewhere along the way, who cared about you beyond measure.

Someone who loved you not more than you deserve--as one often, regrettably, hears in church, where we more often hear that we're miserable sinners, unworthy of God's love--but as much as you deserve *because you are a child of God*.

Because you are beautiful and wonderful just the way you are. Because you are unique and there is no one else in the world just like you, so you truly are special. And because you were created in God's own image, and thus you carry the very DNA of God inside of you.

So who was that person for you? We are going to take a moment to name them in our hearts. Because we will remember them. And on this day we give thanks for the inheritance they have passed on to us.

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In the name of the God who creates us, the Christ who redeems us, and the Spirit who sustains us, amen.