

“Earthbound Saints”
November 3, 2024

Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:37-38

Do not judge; do not condemn.

Pardon. Give.

Once again, we hear Jesus tell of the way his followers should travel.

Once again, we recognize just how difficult this can be.

This past week the campaign season reached its zenith—or nadir—with “garbage” flying from both sides.

Worried about what this indicates about our nation, Megan McArdle wrote: “When too many people see voting as an expressive act in which you demonstrate that you’re one of the good ones, our elections turn into a battle of the vibes and the tribes. It means that we’re often voting against something we hate, rather than for something we like. And when what we hate is the other half of the country, it becomes harder and harder for the losing side to live with the results.”¹

The Psalmist has God speak of our common human identity and destiny: “Go back, O child of earth.” This is different from the judgment of our polarized politics.

This morning, we remember that we are earthbound saints.

This morning, we remember that we feebly struggle—as do all people.

This morning, we remember that we are not alone in those struggles.

Light streams into this room through beautiful windows and each window has a name attached to it: Clarke, Bliss, Hebard, Fonda—early members of this congregation. The light of the windows usually outshines their memory but small plaques remind those who absently glance at them of these members whose names endure even after this congregation’s memory of what they did or said has faded. We remember them because they are part of our past, part of our heritage. The old names still come into our living present.

As the light streams into this room, we think of names not attached to plaques, names whose memories are more recent: Jehle, Kuntz, Weir, Parsons, and Schoonover. You are probably thinking of others as well. I am. These people remind us that God is active in ordinary lives—like theirs and like ours.

In the coming days and weeks, let us keep in mind that our own immediate fears and needs, our own opportunities and options are not the boundaries of our existence. Each of our lives has a larger context of relationships, and we are responsible to those relationships—including our relationship with God—as long as life endures. Even through illness and the process of dying, we are not our own: our lives and what we do with them matter because they belong to God and matter eternally.

The Letter to the Ephesians was written to the “saints”—a common way in which early Christians in 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 but to those of us in the living present as well.

The author of this letter to earthbound saints wants 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 such hope, riches, and greatness, it will come through a spirit that will enlighten the “eyes of our hearts.”

That’s obscure language—I know. It is 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 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.

God is forever making all things new—and on this depends the hope of the world. The end—the real end—is not an event, but the Christ who is the beginning and the end. All that we have and all that we are is from start to finish the work of God. It is the vision of what *can be* in the future that empowers us to act in the present.

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.

Receiving an inheritance is somewhat like encountering grace—it comes unearned, freely given, perhaps unexpected, sometimes 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 people alienated from God and others and the best in ourselves. Sometimes when we are honest, the astonishing happens and we know ourselves as 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 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.

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 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. 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 Joan Jehle, Ken Kuntz, Fern Weir, Joan Parsons, and David Schoonover. 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.

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

ⁱ Megan McArdle, “Garbage scandal shows what happens when we hate half the country.”
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/11/02/trump-harris-garbage-voters-scandal/>