



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Gathering as the Body

All Saints Sunday—November 3, 2019

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 1:11-23

¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory. ¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.



SERMON:

In times like these, where it is all too easy to see the discord and disagreement in the world, where even on a stunning fall day like this, we are reminded of how many things are broken or breaking in this world, I think we can worry too much. I think we can worry that what is unfolding around us, what we read about in headlines, what we hear about from others, worry that what power brokers whether in Washington or Moscow or anywhere else are doing, the princes and principalities, if you will, that somehow in this moment they're going to leave a lasting mark, they're going to change the world decisively and not for the better. The apostle Paul, who Linda just read for us this morning, would say this: Folks, take a deep breath. Go ahead, take that deep breath. And then he would say: Quite frankly, get a grip. Because he would tell you that it's not all up to you. He would tell you that what's been done has already been done and is still being done, and will yet be done.

Don't get me wrong. If you read Paul, he will tell you that each of us has to put on the breastplate of Christ, that each of us has to get ready and go out there and face the very real dangers that lurk in this world. Paul would urge us, he would say: Friends, don't be weary in doing good. He would tell us to return no evil for evil, but instead to only speak words out in the world that are meant for uplifting. Only speak words out there that are meant to reveal the grace of God. He would also write in his letters that there is nothing that love cannot face. He would tell us that, while we might be bruised by these times, we cannot be broken. That while we are pressed on every side seemingly, we cannot be crushed. Because you see the conviction of Paul at the depth of his being is that something has already left a mark that cannot be undone. The light, remember, it shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out.

Paul would tell you the decisive event in all of human history has unfolded, it unfolds still. And Paul is convicted, he is 100% sure it is guaranteed that it is working not for the powers of evil, but instead for good, for possibility, for connection, even and especially in an increasingly disconnected world. For Paul knew that there is nothing in all of creation, no prince or principality, no power of our own, or even that which is sought to be imposed upon us even from the pinnacles of earthly power, that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen?

For you see, in this letter today what Paul says is that we – you and I and all that have come before and all who are yet to come – that we have been made into His body, a body rejected by those earthly powers that held sway in his time. A body not only rejected but crucified even, a life snuffed out by the worst humans can do. Yet as Paul writes in our reading today, against that power so seemingly impressive, the immeasurable greatness of God's power was revealed. Paul is not one given to hyperbole. He is a man of careful words. And so when he says "the immeasurable greatness of God's power," that is something we should pay attention to.

It's clear in this passage that he is referring to the resurrection of Christ. But you'll notice in this writing, in raising Christ not just from earthly clutches but even from the power of death itself. In this passage, this prayer in this beautiful letter to the Ephesians, Paul points away from us and any princes or principalities, to the singular greatness of God's power revealed in this act of resurrection and the new beginnings that sprouted forth, and continue to sprout forth, if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear. For if you read it, this was not merely not the revival of a corpse, the animation of an earthly body, but instead in this moment God took up Christ and all of humanity – that means me and you, too -- replacing Christ over the death-filled powers of princes and principalities, Christ as the ongoing, animating, life-renewing power of God. In that moment, that age, all ages before and all ages yet to come, including this very moment we draw breath, were knit together in one body. Paul would tell you that was the turning point in all of history. So friends, take a deep breath. Go ahead and indulge in cable news or headlines. But then get a grip, and let it go.

What is on full display in this passage is the means by which that moment is not confined to any single moment. But instead that moment of resurrection comes to life in all moments, joining what was, what is and what will yet be, knitting it all together as one body, the body of the Eternal One, the Christ. An ongoing process of the saints of life, whom Paul knew so firmly not to be just those who went before. But if you read his letters, you will notice he called every single person he wrote to a saint. Saints are alive and breathing. You are a saint. You are all saints. And we are all knit together in this moment.

I want you to take a look at your bulletin cover for a moment. There's a painting on it by someone who had an exhibit during my first month at Yale Divinity School, and it was an exhibit that touched me so much. His name is John August Swanson, and you'll notice in this picture, "Festival of Lights," what he depicts is these lights coming together in this endless procession, bringing little strands into bigger strands until we are all one strand. That's what Paul is writing about in this passage, that the saints of light who have gone on before are joining with the saints of light in this very room in one unending procession.

Friends, Paul lived a life that I think was every bit as difficult as what most of us face here in this room. He had witnessed enough, he had suffered enough, he had found enough joy among churches like this one, that he knew to the core of his being that God's working transcends the powers of earth, not just the ones out there in whatever capital of the world, but sometimes the ones we cling to in here. Truths that seem so good and so wise, truths that limit us to what we can observe and know and touch, rather than letting that go to let God's bigger peace – you know, that one that transcends all human understanding – to let that peace and knowledge in our hearts.

And so on this day as we prepare to gather around this table, we need to let go of our self-assuredness and lean into the great truth and power of God, that we really are one body in Christ. Friends, that is not just some pleasant metaphor. That is not just some out-there esoteric idea that gives us peace in this moment or the difficult moments in our life. Paul meant it for real, a literal truth that sustains us in this time and in all times. When one of us weeps, we all weep together. When one rejoices, we all rejoice together. We are one body. But not just those in this room, not just reliant on the gifts of those who currently call this place home, as great as your gifts are. But instead we are called to be a body that exists at this very moment, but that incorporates that great cloud of witnesses, even as it anticipates those who will follow. For that is the immeasurable working of God's great power. And to claim less, to claim that it is just some nice peaceful thing to hold onto, I think sadly is not to fully honor the power and presence of those we come to honor and have written on our hearts this day.

As we think about this church, we think about people who have departed recently. We think about people like Marj Fuller – her power of connection and music is still right

here in this room, if you just open your hearts to feel it. The gifts of Ann Underwood – with her mind, and her heart, and that smile that would light up a room – she is still here with us. The gift of Aleva Henderson – her stubborn conviction, her willingness to do whatever it took to get the job done – she is here, too. The gifts of everyone you wrote on your nametag – they are here with us, if we just open ourselves to that truth and let them enter in.

When we gather around this table, we will lift up the words that Jesus taught us, the words that say that we do all of this at the table to re-member him. That is not just an historic, nostalgic kind of way of bringing him to mind, but an enacted way. Think of that word, to re-member, to put the Body of Christ back together again in this very moment right now, a Body that exists in this age and in all ages. And we will remember something on this day, although it happens every day we gather at this table. In the hymn we're about to sing the third stanza reads thus: "Thine earthly members fit to join thy saints above, in one communion ever knit, one fellowship of love." On this day, this holy day of remembrance, let us never forget the fullness of that truth, that we are already that Body of Christ, and every day becoming more so, that the kingdom of God has drawn near and yet is still unfolding, that those people we honor and remember and celebrate and even grieve today are really joined with us for the rest of this journey, and of course, the next.

So friends, as we prepare to come to this table, please let go of all that stress and worry, and get a grip. Maybe even more importantly, let go. Let go of everything you know just enough that the immeasurable workings of God's power can get a grip on your heart. And then I promise you, all will indeed be well while we yet draw breath, and even when that ceases and we join that great cloud of witnesses.



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor