

Fellowship Divine

Ephesians 1:11-23

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Abel doesn't really remember his godfather Walter, although I have a few precious pictures of them together. Walter was a member of the church I pastored before this one. He was an African-American man with a great big laugh and an even bigger faith. He was a thoughtful leader whose presence helped any group to go deeper into the topic at hand; he had a way of inviting the quieter voices forward, balancing different viewpoints, making conflict fruitful, orienting the group always toward their shared values and goals. He had traveled the world; he collected art; he loved good food and cheap coffee and cigarettes. It was the cigarettes that got him.

I was out on maternity leave a few weeks after Abel's birth when I stopped into the church to pick up a couple of items I'd left in my office. My boss, the senior pastor, called me into his office. Walter had had a lump on his jawbone that he thought was a dental issue, but it turned out to be a bone tumor, a symptom of a cancer that would be difficult to treat. They could buy him some more time, maybe six months.

When I came back from maternity leave, we started to plan Abel's baptism, and although all of the pastoral boundaries trainings say not to do this kind of thing, we asked Walter to be Abel's godfather. He stood up on the chancel with us, promising to teach Abel what it means to be a Christian.

The treatments went better than anticipated; Walter's six months came and went. Then another six months, and another. He attended church, he ate good food and drank cheap coffee and led meetings (he was still the president of the church's board). I would go to his house and we would watch Jeopardy together.

Then things started to go downhill – the treatments stopped working, he was placed on hospice care, with round-the-clock nurses coming to his house. I remember visiting him at home, dealing with the minutia that surround those last days. Tissues and lip balm and trying to remedy the indignities of no longer having the strength to do the simplest things for himself. Trying to get him to take a few bites of food, a few more sips of water, to not smoke too many of those cigarettes (he wanted the cigarettes right to the end). The television always humming in the background – Jeopardy and sitcoms and news. The confusion that set in at the end.

I was out of town on the day that he died, and on my first Sunday back I wept at the Communion table.

Today we observe All Saints' Day: a day where we honor all the saints. Of course, as Protestants, we don't have a formal understanding of sainthood like the Roman Catholic Church does. We do not believe that there are two tiers of Christians, the Saints and us regular people. We do not believe that we need to pray through the saints, asking them to speak to God on our behalf. But we do believe in saints: we believe in everyday faithful Christians who have gone ahead of us, showing us the way of Christ. We believe that there is a great cloud of witnesses who have been gathered into the arms of God. And on this day, we remember the ones who, as a famous prayer puts it, "all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and

with whom we for evermore are one.” (From the King’s College Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols.)

Our language about the communion of saints is lofty and grandiose – maybe you noticed it in the reading from Ephesians. Paul writes: “In 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, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.” Paul is writing to inspire and to exhort the Ephesians to continued faithfulness. He goes on to pray for them: “I 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, so 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, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.”

I sometimes tune out the majestic and cosmic language of scripture. My personal preference is for the parts that feel straightforward and matter-of-fact. I like the parables about sheep and seeds, the stories about sibling rivalries, the long and complicated narratives, the little details that remind me that the Bible started with real people writing things down. I like the earthiness of scripture. Paul is not earthy, usually; and he gets so abstract, sometimes, that although it sounds inspiring, it all kind of blurs together. But today I’m thinking about it differently. The work of grieving for those we’ve lost has so many earthly details. The tissues and lip balm and nursing schedules of a terminal illness. The details of funerals and visiting hours and flowers and paperwork. Dealing with the home and possessions, the mail and the phone calls, all while carrying the heavy weight of grief. As we’ve said goodbye to some saints this year, I’ve been

very aware that death can swamp us with drudgery and details and despair. And so I welcome Paul's lofty language, because it reminds us to lift up our eyes, in the midst of grief, and see the bigger picture. That death is sorrowful, but it is also an encounter with the vast mystery of God. That even in the midst of grief, we are called to be a people of hope. That in the church, we believe that we are part of a great community of saints – people whom God loves – that includes us who are alive, and also includes those who have crossed to the other side. The hymn "For All the Saints" puts it this way: "O blest communion, fellowship divine! We feebly struggle, they in glory shine. Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine."

Finally, Paul reminds us of this: "God 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, far 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." That is: our faith is centered on a place, a moment, where the mundane meets the profound, where life meets death, where humanity meets divinity, where a tomb stands empty and death is revealed as powerless in the face of the power of God's love.

Paul prays for the Ephesians to know in their bones the truth of the resurrection. And on All Saints Sunday, that is what we need: Paul's prayer for all the saints – including us – that we will know in our bones the hope of the resurrection, which unites us in community across time and space with all the saints.

A devotional writer I like, Jan Richardson, wrote a reflection on All Saints Sunday and today's sermon text, shortly after her husband died. And she wrote this poem, a blessing, which I offer to you in closing:

So may we know

the hope

that is not just

for someday

but for this day—

here, now,

in this moment

that opens to us:

hope not made

of wishes

but of substance,

hope made of sinew

and muscle

and bone,

hope that has breath

and a beating heart,

hope that will not

keep quiet

and be polite,

hope that knows
how to holler
when it is called for,

hope that knows
how to sing
when there seems
little cause,

hope that raises us
from the dead—

not someday
but this day,
every day,
again and
again and
again.

On this day, and every day, may we know that the bonds that unite us cannot be broken – not even by death. Because Christ took on body and breath to conquer death, and reigns over all the saints, here and on the other shore, a fellowship divine.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.