

November 3, 2019
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
All Saints' Day
Necrology

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RICHES IN CHRIST

Ephesians 1:11-23

The text begins, "In Christ we have received an inheritance." Receiving an inheritance fascinates everybody. It's this gift that you get that you didn't do anything to get. Slows your heart beat, and makes you calm, and you say, 'o my.'

I grew up on a farm in SW Minnesota. My father farmed until the mid 70's and my brother John until 2015 or so, and now his son, my nephew farms. When my father and mother died, there were 80 acres of farmland left that my brother had not purchased, so 80 acres were divided between the four siblings. I got 20 acres. I felt I should have gotten more; I don't know why. My older sister Barbara, wanted to take her 20 acres and return it to prairie grass and graze buffalo. My brother, John the farmer, groaned at this. It was comical because the actual location of the 20 acres was not determined, so if you can imagine in a huge field of corn, 20 acres cordoned and fenced, with prairie grass and a few buffalo. My brother through the years was patient with his three siblings who left the farm, and kept coming back with our liberal ideas, telling him what he should be doing on his farm.

But I had 20 acres, just handed to me. I felt rich, happy, a load lifted. A sort of buffer from the worst of life, was my 20 acres, my inheritance.

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Now the text says, "in Christ we have received an inheritance." Now the inheritance we receive from Christ is usually not money, sorry to say. So what is the inheritance from Christ, the first installment of which is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is like the first part of the inheritance that guarantees we will get more. The gift of the Holy Spirit is like a seal on a document, locked in the safety deposit box of our heart with guarantees for us the riches of Christ, now, and into eternity.

What is the inheritance we receive in Christ, according to this grand, important letter of Paul, that comes as God's gift?

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When my brother John and I were growing up, John is five years older than me, I remember one day walking through a soybean field together. I was in college and he farming. Both of us were trying to figure out what to do with our lives. Suddenly we stop in the middle of the soybeans and John says, "I want to make a million dollars, Jim. Not cash, but just a million dollars running through my bank account in any given year." I said nothing. It was the last thing I was thinking about for my life. And in my peculiar innocence, was judgmental of my brother, that he would be so crude and so up front and honest about making lots of money. I wish I had a 1,000 acre of farmland right now, but I don't.

What I was trying to figure out way back then, was what this verse means, "In Christ we have received an inheritance." Or what are the riches of Christ. My brother, John, would have had a similar response to my life work, "you stupid kid, how foolish, what a waste."

And so we walked shoulder to shoulder through the years with our separate callings. My brother John always keeping me honest and safe from false piety, and I really don't know what John thinks about what I am doing. It probably irritates him. He did say when I told him about this gig at 1st Pres in Pittsford, "Be sure you get good money, and preach short sermons, and you will be fine."

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The inheritance we receive in Christ, according to the letter to the Ephesians, or the riches of Christ, is written with irony in mind. The phrase plays with our meaning of riches and inheritance, and is meant to stall us to ask, 'what are riches in Christ.' Don't use the word riches, we say, that is a bad choice of words, but no, the writer uses it intentionally, to grab our attention, even to provoke us.

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How can we understand the word translated as 'riches' of Christ. The writer of the text who wrote in the ancient Greek language used the Greek word 'ploutos,' which then translates into English as 'riches.' The root of the word means to 'flow' or 'fill' or 'fullness of goods.' The riches of Christ, I think we can be safe to say, means to be filled up with the fullness of Christ.

Jan and I own a very old farmhouse down in the Finger Lakes. The closest town is Penn Yan. Penn Yan has a buckwheat mill by the Keuka Lake inlet in town, and earlier this week I drove past the mill. Two enormous trucks were waiting to unload at the mill. They back up to the grate that receives the grain and start unloading. And you should see the grain flow out of the tailgate of those huge trucks. I could stand there and stare. Pouring out.

Riches in the Ephesians text can be illustrated with this picture—grain flowing full, fast, and a whole lot of it. The riches of Christ in the Ephesians texts is simply to be filled up with Christ.

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Or more generally, Paul or his follower who wrote the letter are determined to share that there is now an alternate way of viewing the world, and even stronger, there is another reality here, more real than wealth. That in the work of God in Christ, there has been an outpouring of grace and reconciliation that has filled up the world and that constitutes the church, and the church, according to this letter, is the living reality of Christ in the world, and that the Holy Spirit pours into the church gifts of grace that build and grow the church into love, or into the fullness of Christ, a reality that is getting ready to tip over into a new world where even the toughest conflicts and estrangements are loosened and reconciled.

So what about that encounter with my brother in the soybean field back in the 1960's? A million dollars running through a bank account each year, or a life chasing the riches of Christ. One thing I learned is that you cannot buy food, clothing, and shelter with the 'riches of Christ.'

Maybe both can be merged. That the riches of Christ lead to a generosity with our worldly wealth, that to some may seem foolish, but to others who have tasted the riches of Christ, is just plain fun.

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For All Saints' Sunday, we must be confident that inheritance of Christ, the riches of Christ, is enduring, that even death itself does not nullify or change this reality, that this ancient witness of Christian faith so long ago still holds, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, the riches of Christ fill up the whole world.

My brother John lost his son, Aaron, suddenly, just a month ago, leaving two children and his wife of 12 years. So I reach out to my nephew Aaron who lives with Christ now, and to my brother John who is broken-hearted.

On this day, let us celebrate all who lived full lives, and let us pray earnestly for those who have lost loved ones too soon, and most of all let us live out and into the riches of Christ that fills the whole world.