

Ephesians 1:11-23 Pastor Bill Uetrict All Saints Day 11/6/16

As I pored over the readings for today I got this overwhelming sense that they primarily deal with the subject of who is in charge and what life looks like when the ones who are truly in charge are in charge.

Our first reading is a portion of a bizarre apocalyptic text that struggles with powerful kingdoms that have asserted their authority, often causing great harm to people, including the audience being addressed, ancient Jews. The observation and promise is that the kingdoms don't last forever. And this is an especially important promise for those who initially received this text. They are living in light of a Greek leader who is persecuting them. The message is clear. Hang in there! Beasts arise out of the sea. "But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever— forever and ever!" That little beast—actually he is described as a little horn of the beast—will come and go. But ultimately, you, the faithful ones, will reign, will have the authority.

Our second reading from Ephesians, whose language, according to William Loader, "tumbles to excess," paints a poetic picture of what ultimately is in charge in life. This reading, which includes portions of the typical blessing and thanksgiving of a letter of that era, amazes us with long sentences and lofty thought. But the bottom line of this introductory material is intended to communicate to its Gentile (non-Jewish) audience what a great inheritance they have, an inheritance that is ultimately about the authority that they live under.

When the letter says, "In him, *you* also," it is referring to Gentile believers, who are new to this story of Jesus. Like the Jewish Christians who have been around for a while, these Gentile Christians are said to be included in the great story of Jesus. They are recipients, too, of the great gifts of God. They, too, were marked, as they were baptized, with "the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." They were given a foretaste, a pledge, of the great gifts that will come to them. They were blessed

with all the good stuff so that “they may know the hope to which [God] has called [them].”

To be a part of the family of God is to be saturated with hope. To be in the church, which is the body of Christ, is to live in a community in which hope reigns. Hope is the authority for the people of God. It is, as the author of Ephesians says, the “riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints.” To gather here week after week is to gather because of and for the sake of hope. We live in light of, as our president has put it, “the audacity of hope.” The bold proclamation of hope gets us here and then sends us out into a world where hope seems sparse.

The writer of Ephesians says that the power to bring hope is what God put to work on behalf of Jesus. You see, the forces of despair and destruction put Jesus to death. Those who didn’t want hope to reign squashed it, buried it in the ground. But God raised hope from the dead and “seated [it] at [God’s] right hand in the heavenly places.” The forces of despair put Jesus to death, but God elevated the crucified one. God put the crucified one in the place of authority. Christ now reigns in the universe, Ephesians is saying. He is said to be “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.”

And we name a lot of names. Nero and Domitian and Constantine and Stalin and Hitler and Washington and Roosevelt and Eisenhower and Kennedy and Thatcher and Nixon and Obama and Bush and Clinton and Trump. We’re good at naming names. We specialize in naming names. Life often for us is about naming names. Bill and Shar and Steve and Lisa and Paula and Nancy and Bob and Dennis and Sylvia and Lance and Don and Elin and Matthew and Emily. But these names pale in comparison to the name that is above every name that is named. None of these names speak of who truly is in charge. None of these names represent what life is all about. The name that is above every name, the name that represents the true authority in life, the name that is a window into what life means is Christ.

It may not seem like it—and this we must admit—but it is hope and the love that is associated with it that are in charge in the universe. When others want to proclaim that dominating power rules the world, when they want to insist that what wins in life is the most money, the most stuff, the greatest privilege, the largest collection of weapons, we will say “no.” The powers of the world put hope, love to death. But God elevated the crucified Christ to God’s right hand. Hope and love are God’s right hand.

The author of Ephesians says that you and I who are the church are part of the means by which what rules in the universe is expanded into the universe, means by which hope and love saturate all things. He says, “God has made [Christ] the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” We are a part of the expanding work of God in the universe. We are privileged to participate in the work of God filling everything. We are a part of the way in which hope and love saturate everything.

This past week our youth and family director, Ed, was reflecting on how after Tuesday we can pick up the pieces from this election. It has shattered us and torn us apart. I responded to him by saying that from the angle of the church remembering who we are is essential, reminding ourselves of what is in charge in life, who ultimately is the authority, is critical. For us, hope and love are in charge. The name that is above all names is not my name, your name, or any politician’s name. Christ, the sign of hope and love is the name above all names. Nastiness, therefore, is not our gig. We don’t tear people down. We believe that all people are created in the image of God. We respect the dignity of all people, especially those who are forgotten, those who are weak, those who are without. We . . .

Oh, let me get beyond my words. Let me allow the one who is in charge to tell you what we need to be about not only after Tuesday, but every day, what it’s like in the universe when he rules:

Blessed are you poor, for the kingdom of God
is yours. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will

be filled. Blessed are you weep now, for you will laugh
And woe to you, who are rich, for you have received
more than you need. Woe to you who are full now for
you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now
for you will mourn and weep.

When hope and love reign, it is not lack of need that is important. Those who think that they have what they need—money, food, good fortune, answers, certainty—are sorely mistaken. In the place where hope and love rule, need is central. The truth is we lack. Woe to us who are satisfied. Woe to us who run from our weaknesses, who think that life is all about what we've already gotten. The poor, the hungry, the grieving all know that they yet need to be filled.

When hope and love reign, vulnerability is not despised. It is embraced, which is why for us those who have a hard time making it in the world are not cast aside. They will not be recipients of our scorn. Instead, we will walk with them, knowing that all of us are yet to be filled, even those of us who think we are filled.

Living in that kind of world, living in a world where love and hope are the authority, we will now be a little more ready to hear the really hard words of Jesus:

Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one also. And from anyone who takes your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others what you would have them do to you.

When hope and love reign, life isn't about calculation. It isn't about tit-for-tat. It isn't about getting even. It isn't about keeping score. It's about generosity. It's about the ability to let go. When hope and love reign, the arms, the fists, the minds, the hearts are opened wide. And when that occurs, we will discover or be discovered by what really is in charge in the universe. Hope and love reign. Those who trust that live out of hope and love.

