11/2-3/19 Committed to Presence and Witness Rev. Amy Haines

Lk 8:4-15, Eph 1:11-23 Stewardship: Committed to Christ/All Saints Day

When my Grandma Palmer hit her mid-80s, she began to give away her family heirlooms and special keepsakes as Christmas gifts to each member of the family. Expensive ceramic bowls, souvenirs from Japan, special wall prints—all were given as presents, complete with handwritten stories of why they were meaningful.

Grandma would joke that she was giving away our inheritance so that we would never fight over anything when she was finally gone. By the time of her death at almost 91 years young,

the only things of value left were a few rare coins, a few family rings, and a bunch of family photos.

I cannot even begin to imagine what it would be like to inherit a lot of money, or property, or really valuable items. Much of my inheritance will never be moved by other people and never written down as an item in a will. I have inherited my mother’s looks and my father’s stubbornness. I received my musical ability from both of my parents as well as my lack of coordination when it comes to sports. I was blessed to be born into a family that takes its Christian faith seriously, and for better or for worse know that my family has had a great influence in shaping who I am today.

Think about what all you have inherited in life. You may have some treasured possessions

that were passed down in your family from generation to generation. You may also have storage bins or garages full of junk. You may have specific looks or talents or personality traits

that assist you in your work, service or leisure activities. You may also have inherited a love of sports or music or reading or pasta. Some of what you inherited you may wish you did not have,

such as health issues or fears or dysfunctional family dynamics. Yet my hope is there are family traits you are thankful to have inherited, such as compassion or generosity or the importance of family.

Today, as we gather for worship, our Scripture from Ephesians reminds us of a glorious inheritance proclaimed in God’s Word and handed down through the generations,

a spiritual inheritance that we are each called to claim, live by and share with others—

a spiritual inheritance that is both for this life and for eternal life,

a spiritual inheritance that includes hope, faith, love, redemption,

a spiritual inheritance that reminds us of who and whose we are.

As the Scripture proclaims:

“In Christ we have [also] obtained an inheritance.”

“It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living,

part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.”

(NRSV v11a, MSG v11-12)

Unlike most of our family heirlooms that only get passed down from one generation to the next

at the time of death, our spiritual inheritance is passed down in the midst of daily life.

Think about those persons who have welcomed you in Christian hospitality. Think about those persons who shared with you how Christ had changed their lives. Think about those persons whose lives were examples of a commitment to faith. Those persons are the ones who passed on to you the inheritance of faith. They are the ones, both dead and living, who are the saints of Christ.

They did not simply live their faith waiting until the day they die. Rather, they lived their faith daily by bringing a glimpse of heaven into this world. Faith is meant to be lived in the midst of everyday life, sharing with others the gift of a glorious inheritance that we have received,

sharing with others the gift of God’s presence in the here and now.

Our faith inheritance is not only passed on in bread and font and Word and song, it is also passed on in service and sacrifice and choices and character. Our faith inheritance is not only passed on during Sunday morning worship or Wednesday night study, it is also passed on during coffee breaks and staff meetings, in classrooms and cubicles, in the grocery and in a phone call. Our faith inheritance is passed on through the presence and witness and prayers

of those committed to Christ.

Give thanks for those who have gone before you and passed on our spiritual inheritance.

Then recognize than we then have a responsibility to take the faith passed on to us

and live it here and now in tangible ways that passes the faith on to those who come after us.

Last weekend we were called to be committed to prayer as the foundation of our relationship with Jesus. This weekend we are called to be committed to presence and witness as the foundation of our place within the body of Christ, the church. These are two ways that we pass on our spiritual inheritance one to another.

Imagine if you invited a neighbor to worship, and on the one Sunday they decide to show up, you were not there. How does your presence in worship make a difference to a newcomer?

Imagine that the person who regularly sits near you in worship had a rough week, and was looking forward to your hug or word of encouragement. How does your presence in worship make a difference to that person?

Imagine that a fellow church member is going through the same struggles you have now overcome, and they marvel at how your faith has guided you. How does your presence encourage that person to persevere?

Hebrews 10:24-25 proclaims:

“Let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds.

Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.”

We are called by the Scriptures to meet together with other believers, to be regularly and intentionally present with one another in worship and fellowship, in study and in service. We are called to be present with one another not to bring each other down, but rather to uplift one another. To remember who and whose we are, and to be strengthened to live by faith in the week ahead.

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence

we are more than just a body in a pew

we are more than a number on a stat sheet

we are more than a new face for a committee

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence

We are not here to convey social standing in the community

We are not here to say we are better than anyone else

We are not here as part of a divine checklist

that determines how we earn our way into heaven

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence we display our commitment to Christ through claiming our place in the church. When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence we declare our place among God’s covenant people.

.. A little old man was seen every Sunday morning walking to church. He was deaf, so he could not hear a word of the sermon or the music of the choir, or the hymns sung by the congregation.

A scoffer asked, "Why do you spend your Sundays in that church when you can’t hear a word?" He replied, "I want my neighbors to know which side I’m on!"

-Jason Cole “Is Church Attendance Necessary?” 2-05 sermoncentral.com

Is the church, perfect? By no means. Will we never be hurt by the words of someone else in the church? Most likely not. Will we always agree with every decision made by the church leadership or every word spoken by or the pastor? No.

Still God calls us to be present with one another. Still God calls us to live and learn and grow together. Still God calls us to be the church in this world, with a message of good news to live and to share.

Our presence makes a difference! In worship-In Sunday School and other studies-In youth group or small groups-In teams and committees-Through Stephen Ministry and informal hugs and prayers

We are called by God to commit to be present one with another, as members of the body of Christ. To make our time together a priority. To be an active participant in the life of the church.

To show and share Christ’s love with one another.

Our presence is part of our witness to our faith in Jesus Christ.

Often we think of our witness as what we say, but witnessing also includes what we do. How do our words and actions proclaim our spiritual inheritance? How does what we do and say

share God’s love, forgiveness and promise of life eternal?

At the heart of Christianity is a call to share our faith, to share our testimonies of God’s presence in our lives, to share what difference being a Christian makes in our daily existence.

By definition, to be a witness is to testify to what we have seen or experienced. This is true in a court of law. This is also true when it comes to our faith. We are called to share our witness of God’s mercy and grace. We are called to tell our testimony of how Christ continues to make a difference in our lives. We are called to proclaim our hope of eternal life with God.

Martha Grace Reese reminds us:

“The heart of our witness [evangelism] is being in love with God, being part of a church you love

and caring about other people who do not know that faith. Faith sharing focuses on relationships, not ‘bringing in more young people’ or ‘helping our church to grow again.’

--Martha Grace Reese “Unbinding the Gospel” p.5 adapted

How many people are challenged, however, to be a witness for Christ? They want to follow Jesus, yet don’t want to tell others about Jesus. Or they want to tell others about Jesus, yet remain silent in fear of how the other person will react. They want to be a part of a church,

yet don’t actively engage in worship, study, fellowship or service. They want to be a disciple,

yet pick and choose what part of discipleship they will engage in.

Our faith witness calls us to share Christ through word and action.

Consider those who shared their faith with you. What was their witness? What did they say or how did they live that invited you to know Jesus?

Consider now your witness. How has Jesus made a difference in your life? When was the last time you told someone else about that difference? How do you live in such a way to share the love of Jesus with others?

Remember that your witness is your story of God’s story in your life. Not your parents’ story,

not the story of the person sitting next to you, only your story.

Only God knows in what ways God’s power and love and grace will be shown through your presence and witness! In what ways you will bear good fruit for the kingdom of God in this world!

So live for God in what you say and do, and allow God to nurture the seeds of faith in those who see and hear your witness.

Before the seeds of faith we plant can take root, however, we are called to open our hearts and minds so that God’s seeds of faith can take root in our lives. Only when we are open to receiving our spiritual inheritance can we then proclaim it and share it with others.

So once again this week we hear Jesus’ Parable of the Sower, that reminds us of the extravagant love of God, and the surprising ways of the Kingdom of God. If God is the sower,

God will sow the seeds of his Word, the seed of faith, the seeds of salvation wherever God can.

On the path. On the rocks. In the thorns. And in good soil.

Consider today the rocky ground…

The grain fields of Palestine have always been filled with rocks jutting out of the ground or rocks lying just below the surface. Crops may sprout up quickly and appear to be healthy and growing but under the surface the plant’s roots are shallow as they hit rock, unable to grow deep, unable to reach vital nutrients and moisture that will nourish the plant when the sun shines high on a bright summer day.

If we are like soil of the rocky ground than we may be fair weather Christians who follow Christ when we can gain something from it or follow Christ when we expect health and wealth but those who abandon our faith at the first real sign of struggle or the first tragedy in our lives that cannot be easily explained away.

I remember a girl in high school who was like this rocky ground. At a revival meeting she accepted the Lord and was filled with joy and enthusiasm for sharing her love for Jesus. She was almost obnoxious at school because she was so passionate for the Lord. But this young woman had no real church home, no real Christian community who would nurture her in the faith.

About a month or two after her conversion I began to notice that her passion was subsiding

and she was beginning to slip back into her old patterns. Too soon the pressures and temptations of high school took over her joy and passion for Christ.

Those who are like the rocky ground will have a joyful conversion experience, but after that experience will not nurture their faith through study, prayer, or Christian community.

Soon enough the daily challenge and temptations of the world or the antagonism and struggles with non-Christian family members and friends will pull them back into their old ways of sin

and may pull them back from God entirely.

When we do not nurture our faith through study and service then our spiritual roots cannot grow and they can be easily scorched and wither away. For the less we are present with the community of faith, the less we will nurture the witness of our faith.

God does not call you and I to be people of the rocky ground. Instead, God invites us to be people of the soil, those who open up hearts and minds and souls to our rich spiritual inheritance so that God can take root, grow us in God’s ways, then encourage us to bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

Consider the final verse of the parable explained:

“The seed that fell on good soil are those who hear the word and commit themselves to it with a good and upright heart. Through their resolve, they bear fruit.” (v15 CEB)

Today, we are called to be those willing to hear and ponder and commit to God’s ways in our lives. To recognize our spiritual inheritance, and claim it as our own. To recognize we need one another, and be open to learning from each other’s stories and experiences. To recognize we each have a story of faith to share, and not be afraid to share our stories of God’s presence in our lives.

Our presence and witness in the church reminds us that we are not alone on this journey of faith. We give thanks for those who have gone before us. And we are called to live so that there will be those who come after us.

As we continue on our journey of faith, as we look ahead to next year, In what ways will you honor those who have gone before us by living and sharing your faith in intentional ways of word and action? In what ways will you commit to living for Jesus through the congregation of First UMC of Springboro through your presence and witness?

Together, may we claim and celebrate and share our spiritual inheritance in specific ways of word and witness, love and presence.

May it be so. Let us pray.