

A Living Inheritance
May 1, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:

Psalm 16
1 Peter 1:3-9

Let's begin this morning with a little imagining.

Picture in your mind this kind of scene:

A person has died and the family has gathered
not long after for the traditional reading of the will.

It is a moment fraught with mixed emotions.

Grief, sadness, mourning.

The more the person was loved,
the less interest there probably is
in what was left to whom.

No material things can fill the void.

Of course, Hollywood has given us other ways
this scene may play out.

In movies and on TV, it seems this kind of scene is always set
in a stately, wood-paneled study.

The no-good son, the free loader, is there,
hoping he gets his share of the estate.

Or maybe there is the suspense of what will be left
to the loyal first wife and what will be left
to the trophy wife.

But real life isn't usually like that.

Maybe there is a favorite piece of jewelry, an old watch
or a few pieces of furniture.

Sentimental items that keep the deceased nearby
in their own way.

Or maybe the family's greatest hope is that
there will be at least something to help cover the costs
of the funeral and burial.

Now picture a very different scene.

The disciples are gathered in a sparsely furnished upper room
just days after Jesus, their Lord and leader,
has been crucified.

There is talk about resurrection.

Some even claim to have seen and spoken
to the resurrected, revealed Jesus.

But, more urgently, the disciples
are wanted men and women ...
associates of this controversial figure whom both
the Romans and the religious officials
wanted out of the way.

Inheritance is the last thing on their minds.

Their very world has been shattered.

The one they called "messiah" has left,
seemingly leaving nothing behind.

Jesus had painted the kingdom of God on earth
in broad strokes ... but no blueprints were left ...
no organizational design ...
no governing documents to bring the vision to life.

Jesus was a humble carpenter before becoming
a nomadic preacher and teacher.

What's the point in even thinking about
any kind of inheritance?

The following, the movement, is almost certain
to fall apart now, they must have been thinking.
Then there is all of us.

For the last seven weeks or so, we have tried
to move with intention toward the cross
and the empty tomb.

Here on Sundays, we've taken to heart Christian disciplines
and traditions that come straight from Christ's own ways.

We've plunged ourselves into the highs and lows
of the Passion, asking,
"which Jesus would we choose?"

We've dwelt, even if but for a minute,
in the darkness of the tomb.

And we've run through the morning twilight
to find the tomb empty and ask, "Is it true?"

Given all of that, there is an inevitable sense
of "what now?" that comes
on this Second Sunday of Easter.

We forget all too quickly that Easter is its own season,
not just one day.

The terrible losses from violent weather across the South,
the royal wedding ... the NFL draft have preoccupied us.

We come to church today knowing somewhere
deep down inside that every Sunday
is a resurrection day, that we are to be
as jubilant today as last Sunday.

But there is a void there, too, a kind of unintended malaise
at risk of settling in after the parade and the pageantry of Easter.

It may be that, in another part of our being,

we feel as wayward ourselves as the disciples
in that upper room ... not knowing what happens next.

On this day, we are given the opening lines
of the First Letter of Peter.

First Peter is thought by most scholars to be written
in the name of Peter, rather than by Peter.

It is addressed to a group of gentile Christians
living in Roman-occupied Asia Minor,
somewhere between 40 and 60 years after Christ.

For those readers – but also for us – it is a letter of comfort,
reassurance and affirmation.

It's also a statement of clear encouragement to all believers
that we are to remain “in the world,”
serving God in our families, institutions and in society.

In these ways, 1 Peter is a letter to all Easter people.

As the letter states, through the resurrection,
our merciful God gives us “a new birth into a living hope.”

This is our inheritance and it is “imperishable,
undefiled, unfading.”

It is a living inheritance.

* * *

The author of 1 Peter must have known that the idea
of inheritance was a powerful way of communicating
what God in Jesus left for us.

The code of inheritance was as old as the ancient Hebrew law
itself, even older.

In the Patriarchal period we find in Genesis,
the first son had the advantage in inheritance,
most often getting a double share over other brothers.

Think about the story of Isaac and Jacob vying
for their father's blessing, which brought with it wealth.

As with everything, though, the idea of inheritance took on a much broader meaning in and through Christ.

Thomas Steagald, a Methodist pastor in Shelby, writes that according to the Gospel of Luke there may have been only about 120 followers of Christ in total ... while Christ walked the Earth.

Steagald says the Apostle Paul indicated that only about 500 people ever laid eyes on Jesus.

In other words, personal acquaintance with Christ ... or even a claim to have seen him ... added up to a tiny fraction of the world's population then, much less today.

But the people of Easter faith receive the inheritance all the same.

As we heard in 1 Peter:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribably joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1:8-9)

In Christ, God's rule for inheritance is one of grace, not the law.

All receive access to the legacy of Christ's suffering and resurrection.

What we inherit, first and foremost and without comparison, as 1 Peter claims, is salvation.

By God's great mercy, we are given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading

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When we think about heirs to contemporary inheritances,
the world gives us all kinds of examples,
good and not so good.

Does anyone remember who inherited \$12 million
from hotel magnate Leona Helmsley?

I don't remember the name.

But it was a dog.

That's one way to pass on an inheritance.

And what about those who receive a large inheritance?

There is another hotel heiress, Paris Hilton.

Now there is an example of what NOT to do
with fortune and fame, at least if you ask me.

On Friday, we saw another kind of example
of what one can do with inheritance.

I'm referring to the royal wedding of Kate Middleton
and William Windsor, as in the British Windsors,
as in the fellow who will inherit the throne of England.

The press has been abuzz about how the young couple
can bring the British monarchy into the 21st century
by promoting more progressive ideas,
generous philanthropy and public service.

Let us hope so.

But what about the rest of us – us more normal folk?

What does it mean for us, as children of God,
heirs through Christ, to be given an inheritance that,
as 1 Peter says,
is "imperishable, undefiled and unfading?"

With an inheritance like that, do we retreat from the world,
like a third-generation-of-money rich spoiled kid?

With our salvation assured, bought with the blood of Christ,
do we play it safe?

Do we abandon the world?

How many stories of inheritance have we heard in which
great things were possible ... but the money was spent
keeping up three or four homes and cars and yachts ...
and club memberships while the money
did little else in the world?

Do we as Christians look out at the world with all
of its messiness ... its contradictions ... its suffering
... its dangers and betrayals?

Do we see all that and say, "No thanks. I'll just sit back
and live off the dividends of my inheritance of grace"?

The author of 1 Peter recognized that his readers
faced some of the same questions.

As Christians, they were among the first to live in the tension
between what their faith required ...
and what the world wanted ...
the tension between rejecting some societal norms
and accepting others.

That is murky territory for Christians to this day, is it not?

So 1 Peter encouraged them to live as imitators of Christ,
who did anything but shrink from the toils, snares
and complications of the world.

1 Peter called on his audience to "have unity of spirit,
sympathy, love for one another,
a tender heart and a humble mind."

But what, specifically, immediately, tangibly, have we inherited, one still might ask?

I can think of a few things:

We have inherited a faith that professes Jesus Christ
as teacher, preacher and prophet and Lord and savior.

We have inherited a denominational identity as Presbyterians.

For some that is an honorable inheritance.

Others might care less about being Presbyterian,
quite frankly.

It just happens to be the name on the sign of this church
we have found.

Still, it is our inheritance here, not one to revere
only with backward-looking perspective
and tradition-bound thinking.

It is ours to live into ... and out of ...
helping keep what should be kept ...
and working otherwise to bring it into
the twenty-first century.

Later this month, we may finally cross
an important threshold on that journey.

The denomination needs 87 Presbyteries to approve
new language in our constitution that would remove
its current restrictions against ordination
of qualified gays and lesbians
in faithful committed relationships to the offices of elder,
deacon or minister of word and sacrament.

Eighty four Presbyteries have voted to make the change.

But hear me carefully here.

As long as some of us have worked for that day,
we need, at this important moment,
to be just as mindful about the health

of the whole denomination as we have been
on creating a more just and open church.

As that day approaches, if this change is God's will,
let us pray for unity among Presbyterians ... the same unity for which 1 Peter
calls.

Let us find ways to reach out to those who may be
on the other side of this issue ...
and express our desire to work through our differences
rather than see the church split.

For the health of the body, let us do our best
to understand the disorientation some may feel ...
just as others have felt their own
sense of disorientation.

Finally, we have inherited this remarkable place of worship,
of ministry, of learning and of mission outreach,
here at the corner of Fifth and Park.

At least almost all of us have inherited it.

A few senior saints were here to open the doors
to the rest of us.

A great part of that inheritance was empty space,
which God has filled with the children and mothers
of hard-working Latino families,
homeless women in transition ...
and an African-American congregation that shares
our denominational identity.

But my question ... church ... is this:

Can't we do more with this God-given dividend
of our inheritance?

Can we do more, must we do more, to embrace
and walk more closely with those who share our campus
seven days a week?

Can we see the face of Christ a bit more clearly
by spending more time and sharing ministry

with and to those who are just a few feet away?

Or are we, for the most part, just their landlords?

* * *

When the disciples first gathered after
Jesus' death and resurrection, they didn't know
what to do, what to think, where to go.

But in the following days, the resurrected Lord
gave his disciples clear and specific instructions
about what to do with their inheritance.

One of the things he said, according to the Gospel of John,
was: "I do not give to you as the world gives."

Truer words have never been spoken.

Now, as heirs to such an inheritance of grace,
let us believe more deeply and act more boldly,
as if ours really is a living inheritance that is truly
"imperishable, undefiled and unfading."

Amen.