

WESLEY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
November 6, 2016
Text: Ephesians 1:11-23
Matthew 22:34-40
Title: Tables of Abundance: The Gifts of the Past

When we gather for communion, we always gather with a great cloud of witnesses – those who have come before us, those who are with us, and all of God’s people. Sometimes the liturgy becomes so familiar to us that we may hardly notice the words or pay attention to their meaning. At the beginning of our communion prayer we give thanks to God who formed us and created us. We proclaim, “With all your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn.”

“All your people on earth and all the company of heaven.” Today, especially, as we celebrate All Saints Day, I want us to be particularly aware of that. This week I read a particularly poetic statement about this. “Whether you know it or not, you have been surrounded, enveloped, hugged by a great cloud of witnesses who have come before you. From the beginning, it was made very clear this is not a race, but a sacred journey. Hand clasping from the beginning, from your beginning, it becomes very clear, this is not a journey that we make alone.”ⁱ

It is a journey we take together – in community; in communion with those who gather here today; in communion with all who have shaped our lives; in communion with those whose names we raised as we lit candles to celebrate and honor their memories; and also in communion with those who have gathered in this sanctuary as faithful believers anytime during the last 50 years and those who gathered in the churches that gave birth to this congregation.

In the letter to the Ephesians we heard Paul's words to the believers gathered in Ephesus, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." Paul prays that they, and we, will know the hope to which God has called us. During the history gathering time a couple of weeks ago, we were described as a "church of hope". We continue to celebrate the hope to which God has called us and the ways we have lived out that hope.

Paul prayed that they, and we, would know the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints. We have been blessed through the years in so many ways and we have truly experienced that rich and glorious inheritance.

Paul prayed that they, and we, would know the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe. Through the years those who have gone before us, those who have been with us have prepared and joined us at tables of abundance where God's great love, power, mercy, and grace have been known.

We are also part of that meal in an upper room so long ago, that Jesus shared with his disciples. We remember how he told them that whenever they gathered they should remember his life and remember him.

But the saints are not only those who lived long ago. As we sang just a few minutes ago, the saints are all those who have loved Jesus and served him in the many places to which they were called. The saints are doctors, soldiers, pastors, teachers, factory workers, and store clerks. We can meet saints in school, on the street, in the store, in the church, by the sea, in the house next door. We are also part of that great cloud of saints – people seeking to live our lives faithfully wherever we may be.

Those we celebrate as saints did not know the full impact of their lives on those they touched and we will never know the ways that we have touched the lives of others. I pray that as we gather today, we will allow ourselves to be open to the memories of the many tables around which we have gathered. There is one table that I often think about as we gather for communion.

In the first church I served, it was the custom for the children to come in from Sunday School to receive communion with the congregation. At that point, I would say to the children, "Always remember that Jesus loves you very much." One morning, as I served all the children and came to the end of the rail where one of their teachers was standing I said to her the more traditional words that I typically said to other adults. She looked at me and said, "Does Jesus love me too?"

She was a precious daughter of God who had been sexually abused as a child by a parent who she was supposed to be able to trust as the person who would always take care of her. Traumatized she had lived a life seeking love in the all the wrong places and had been promiscuous in her teens and early adult life. She had also turned to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain and was now in recovery and counseling. To her, the question "Does Jesus love me too?" was not an idle question. She desperately needed to know that Jesus loved her in ways that she could not yet love herself. I looked at her, gave her a hug and said, "Yes, Jesus loves you very much." Her face lit up and from then on, every time she came to the table, she smiled and said to me, "Jesus loves me." She is one of the saints who had a powerful impact on my life and in my experience of the power of communion.

I pray that we will recall the memories of the times we have gathered around the table, the ways our lives have been touched by God through the lives of others. I pray we will celebrate those table of abundance and that we will allow ourselves to be open to and to receive the gifts of the past.

ⁱ www.worshipdesignstudio.com Adapted from "Pilgrimage" by Susan Palo Chewwien, Crossings: Mediations for Worship. MorningStar Music Publishers, St. Louis, Missouri