

Branching Out from the Past: *The Inheritance of the Saints* -

Colossians 1:1-14 Norwalk Christian Church, November 6, 2016, Branching Out Stewardship Series, Year C, Proper 27

Every time our Annual Congregational meeting Sunday comes along, I think about Val Johnson. Val was minister at our church twice, and a central figure in the history of this congregation. He baptized and married many of you, and did the funeral for many of your parents and grandparents. Val was still an active member of this church in his 90s, and he was here almost every Sunday.

I told at his funeral about how most Sundays, during the passing of the peace, Val would have a joke to tell me, usually about the offering. He'd say things like, "Pastor, are you going to take up an offering this Sunday?" "I think we will, Val," I'd say. Then he'd throw up his hands, turn his head, and say, "Well, then, I'm out of here!"

One Sunday I got one over on him. We were in line together before Sunday School, getting some cookies, and he said, "Pastor, are you going to take up an offering today? I don't have anything to give, just this dollar." And he pulled out a crumpled up one dollar bill from his pocket. I looked at him as serious as I could, put my hand on his shoulder, and said, "Val, every dollar count." He busted out in laughter.

The last conversation I had with Val was on this Sunday, two years ago, just a couple of days before he died. It was after our congregational meeting, and he was sitting just outside those doors, enjoying a heaping plate of potluck food, his last, big meal. And he asked me after our congregational meeting, "Pastor, how did the budget go?" Val liked to joke about the offering, but it was no joking matter for him. Val was always concerned about the business of the church. Even long after his tenure as pastor, he wanted to make sure the church would survive and thrive, and he knew if it would, it would take dedicated leaders and dedicated givers.

I think about Val on this Sunday, because it is on his shoulders that today we stand. But it's not just Val. There are so many people who, long before you or I ever stepped into the doors of this church, wrote checks, and set up yard sales, and made and purchased chicken and beef noodle dinners, and mowed the lawn, and vacuumed the carpet, and painted the fellowship hall, and planted trees, and the list goes on and on.

Behind our church stands several gigantic spruce trees. Those trees were purchase around 25 years ago through memorial money, given by loved ones in honor of a deceased church member. And now, look how big those trees are? So much around us is here because of the sacrifices of those before us.

Today, as we've mentioned, is All Saint's Sunday, a day we remember the faithful ones who have gone before us, on whose shoulders we now stand. And I wonder, right now, if you might have a name on your lips, someone who was once a part of this congregation, who gave so much so that we could be here today.

I invite you to say their name aloud:

Behind everyone of those names is a story. Maybe it's a Sunday School teacher, or a trustee, or an elder, or a minister, or faithful member who loved you, welcomed you, and supported you.

So much we owe to those who have gone before, their legacy branching out from the past all the way to today.

In the scripture we just read from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in the ancient city of Colossae, he calls this "The Inheritance of the Saints." Like last week, our text is one of Paul's prayers. Paul loves to offer in his letters prayers for the church, and they give us great insight into what he considers to be most important to the life of the church.

Our theme last Sunday, this Sunday, and the next, is "Branching Out", which is the theme of our Stewardship Campaign. And in this prayer, Paul talks a lot about branching out. He has heard of the great faith of the Colossian Church, how the hope of the Gospel has been growing fruit in their lives and in their community, just as it has been branching out and bearing fruit throughout the whole world.

Paul even mentions the name of one of their saints, who first planted the seed of the gospel in their lives, Epaphras, a faithful minister of Christ.

Paul is amazed at the great faith of this church and, "For this reason," he says, "we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Paul prays that they will continue to "bear fruit in every good work and" ... "grow in the knowledge of God," and that they may "be made strong with all the strength that comes from [God's] glorious power, and may...be prepared to endure everything with patience." It sounds a lot like the prayer we read last week to the church in Ephesus.

Paul continues, giving thanks that they have been able to "share in the inheritance of the saints in the light." It's a strange sentiment, really, for when you think about it, Christianity is new. There's not a lot of an inheritance yet. But Paul's vision is greater than that. For Paul, these new churches stand on the shoulders of generations of faithful people, from Abraham to the Disciples to people like Epaphras.

None of this would be possible and none of us would be here without so many faithful women and men, who gave so much.

All this reminds of the saints whose lives we should give thanks for, today. But more than that, it's a call to action.

A couple months ago, I was in a meeting with some leaders and we were talking about creating a building plan for our church, the goal being to really lay out a vision for our facilities, making plans for what needs to be repaired or updated in the coming years, and what we need to do to plan, physically, for the future of the church.

It was mentioned how the last time we last did a major building project around here was around 20-25 years ago, when the North Entrance and offices were added, along with the class rooms below. A major project was done at that time, with many of you giving time and money to make it happen. I've heard stories of painting parties downstairs.

Today, our ministry is possible because of the plans and sacrifices that members of this church made 25 years ago. And in this meeting a few months ago, we asked, "What are we going to do, today, that will ensure this church, 25 years from now, will have what they need to pursue the mission of God in that time?"

Or think about it this way: 2019 will be our 150th anniversary. Our church was founded in 1869. That's quite an inheritance of saints! Almost 150 years ago, these Saints decided to start a church in this place, before there ever was a Norwalk. They first met under a tree by a bridge over the North River, and then, 3 years later, purchase this piece of property, the same dirt where Norwalk Christian Church has thrived since then.

It's easy, when we think about Stewardship and look at the Church budget for 2017, to keep our focus on right now. We look at the immediate, what we can or can't do now, what we can give, this week, this month, this year. And that's important, and it'd sure be great if we finished this year strong in our giving.

But I invite us to expand our vision today. To look beyond today, into 25 years, and from there, 150 years ahead. What will we do today that ensures that the church that gathers here, then, our children, grand children, great grandchildren, and so many more people who will one day find life and faith in this church--what are we doing today to ensure that this church will be around then, still sharing the journey, still welcoming all to the Lord's table, no conditions, just as Christ welcomes us all.

What are we doing, now, to follow in the legacy of these Saints? Are we creating an inheritance, that one day others will enjoy in this place? What can we do, now, that will ensure that our church remains a vibrant community of faith long into our future?

Next Sunday, we are having Commitment Sunday. We are asking everyone *who wants to participate* to prayerfully consider ways you feel God calling you to make a greater commitment to our church life together. That commitment could be financial, by you

pledging your generosity to our church mission, committing to giving more, with greater intention and regularity. It could be you saying that you want to commit to do more ministry, to get more involved in our church life together in new ways: maybe plug into an existing ministry or follow the dream God has given you and start something new.

Next Sunday is our opportunity to declare the ways we are committing our lives to ensure that this community of faith--this church--will have what it needs, with people and resources, to achieve its mission today, and to leave an inheritance of faith for future generations.

We are, today, are the saints who are building the inheritance that future generations will claim. Our names will one day be the names they declare on future All Saints Day.

How are we following in the example of the Saints before us? What inheritance will we leave?

Amen.