Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost

ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

November 6, 2022

*“We Who Believe”* Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-31

The letter to the church in Ephesus and the Gospel of Luke’s account of the Beatitudes come together this morning to help us understand what it means to be a believer. For we who believe in Christ, are more than just members of an organization. We are his living testimony of the goodness and grace to which he gave life and breath, for which he lived and died, and was raised to new life. We who believe are his beneficiaries and his legacy in the world. We are Christ’s body.

I would like to begin by asking us all to notice that Luke is not the only Gospel writer to recall for us Jesus’ Beatitude sermon. Mark records Jesus delivering it in a small boat on the sea. Matthew remembers it on a mountain top.

Luke, however, is the one who has Jesus leading the whole group of newly chosen disciples from a mountaintop to “a level place.” Mountaintops are Luke’s traditional choice for Jesus’ retreats for prayer and meditation, but when it comes time to instruct and proclaim important truths about God and our life with God, Luke remembers Jesus bringing the disciples to a place where all may hear and be accommodated equally—no one stands above another, neither is the teaching isolated nor removed. It is in a place that is accessible for all.

An equal and accessible place—keep that idea in your mind as we turn our attention to the letter to the believers in Ephesus.

Let us begin by acknowledging that the Ephesians are far removed from us in terms of time and culture. Also, in reading the letters found in the New Testament, we should remember that they were written to particular communities, and with particular goals for each of those communities. Thus, we may be tempted to wonder what they have to offer us.

The genius of the letters is that they address issues of human beings who, like us, wanted to feel safe, and who wanted to attach their lives to something good and meaningful. This is a timeless human desire.

Also like us, they were believers in Christ who, despite their faith, still found themselves in a world filled with challenges to it, and in their daily living. Like us, they needed help and encouragement to continue their journey with Christ. To borrow a line from (the hymn) *Amazing Grace,* they needed a reason to remain faithful in the face of the “many dangers, toils and snares” from which they “had already come.”

So, the letters, while they might not have been written *to* us, they were, indeed, written *for* us because they remind us that we are more than believers. We who believe have also been marked, through baptism, by Christ, and received into the body of Christ.

As Paul writes, we have been “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” [v.13]. This is what baptism is. It is an act of faith that reflects the commitments of both the one baptized to God, and God’s commitment to us—that is: we who believe respond to the good news of God’s love by being baptized. God responds to our seeking by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit—who is the “pledge of our inheritance” [v.14], and Paul writes, he *declares* that this inheritance is experienced once believers accept the fact of their destiny and their calling.

In addition, the Ephesians are informed that they can have confidence in this calling because it is based on God’s divine power and might. So great is this inheritance, so overwhelming the God’s power making it possible, that the response of the faithful is to do nothing less than “live for the praise” of Christ’s glory.

On this first morning in November, we are gathered to remember that, and to do at least two things. The first is to remember the way in which the saints of this church did just that.

Having been baptized, they believed in God’s power in their lives and they lived it. They built this church—the buildings and the beautiful grounds that surround us. They also built lives and bore witness to God’s presence and power: with the example of their lives and actions, to the value and goodness of their life, and to the worth and dignity of their community. They did this even in periods (like the time after the bombing of Pearl Harbor), where their very ethnicity was held in contempt and suspicion by much of the surrounding community.

Like us, they faced changing times; times when they decided to become completely self-supporting and became the first Japanese church in the islands to do so; times had to move the physical location of the church; times when they had to drop the word “Japanese” from the name of the church; times when their bank accounts were frozen by the federal government during the war; times when English became the more common language in the congregation and they had to respond to that.

All of these things required a great deal of patience and faith…and our ancestors in the faith managed it.

So, what about us? The power of God is still available to us. Do we believe in the power of God’s Holy Spirit in *our* lives, today? Do we believe that we, too, have God’s power? Can we, too, give glory to Christ in real and tangible ways? Do we believe we have been given the power to act—to praise Christ in ways that transform life from the way it is, to the way it should be?

Do we believe that God’s power is stronger than the powers in the world mindlessly and soullessly destroying the earth, destroying human dignity and thriving? Do we believe God’s power is a transforming power, a power that plants and grows, that cares and nurtures—the very power of life?

In a few minutes from now, we are going to bear witness to the baptism of a little girl who just turned one year old on Thursday.

Kanna, her brother Eiji and her sister Namie, and all of the children of this church, Kasey and Kalie, Eli and Zeke, Aria and Daxon, Zoe and Wyatt, and all of your children and grandchildren, and great grandchildren—they will all grow up in a world in which the power of God and the power of death will continue to struggle against each other.

The question becomes: which side of that struggle will they see *us* supporting?

Will they find us feeding and giving care to those who are hungry?

Will they find us listening to the Holy Spirit, even when she speaks to us in new and unusual ways?

Will they find us building shelters for the houseless—if not with our own hands then with the public and private projects and initiatives to which we can give our voice and lend our support?

Will that see us standing beside those who are working for recognition of their dignity and worth, their right to live without fear?

Will they find us taking the time and effort to understand the complex world of histories and relationships in order to hear and respond to the Spirit’s true leading toward grace and righteousness?

Will they see us taking our belief in God’s desire for freedom and goodness for all people, and advocating for this in the halls of worldly power?

Friends, the photographs you see before you are some of the leaders of this community known as Nu’uanu Congregational Church. They stand as representatives of the many ancestors who built and maintained the ministry and mission of this church.

They did this by taking their baptisms very seriously, by receiving the inheritance given to us by Christ, which is the power of God’s love to move and go forth into the world to bless and heal and make whole.

We here in this place are recipients of their story, and our lives and ministry make it ours, too. We will turn to the future led by the same Holy Spirit, and we will go forth strengthened by the same power of God, and we too, will forge a new era in the church which will glorify Christ, that will honor the saints of the church, and will give our church—our saints in the making—a vision and a legacy of which they too may be proud to inherit.

Will we do that, church? If so, please say, Amen!