

“Already and Not Yet”

Our two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, Nora, has a ritual she likes to follow when she visits our home. In the corner of our family room we have a number of pictures on display. The framed photographs sit on a long, medium height table, about eye level for her. The pictures are of various groupings of our family; couples, kids, family reunions, celebrations, graduation pictures, some of them recent, but many of them taken years and years ago. Nora likes to pick up the frames one at a time, point to individuals in the picture and ask, “Who’s that?” Some of us in the pictures look very different now than we did when the photos were taken. We’ll say, “That’s your daddy when he was just a boy” or “That’s Papa before he grew his beard” or “That picture was taken before you were born.” Some of those pictured in the frames are no longer with us. Actually, that’s not quite right. Let me say it this way, some of those who are pictured are no longer in this world but they are still with us, if you know what I mean. I never get tired of the ritual of naming the family, past and present. It doesn’t matter if we are a young child or have lived many years, whenever we name them and remember, it reminds us who we are.

Every Sunday morning, when we come together to worship God, we are reminded who we are. Now and then over the years, I’ve been asked what is so important about coming to church. I think behind this question is a somewhat passive-aggressive challenge to prove to the one asking that worship is somehow relevant to their lives. “What’s so important about church?” they ask, as if to say, “Tell me why I should commit my time, my energy, and other resources in my life to this religious tradition?” Perhaps the best response to the question of why we gather together is the fact that it reminds us who we are. We are the family of Christ. We are those who say “yes” to the one who connects us to the reality of God. This God-connection in Christ is more than just something we believe because we think about it with our minds. Being the family of Christ marks us as those who live in God-centered ways. Being a Christian isn’t about what we think. It’s about how we live. We gather as “church” because it reminds us that faith is a priority for us in the world. We gather in the name of Christ not just because it is what we do, this is who we are.

The letters of Paul, like the one to the church in Ephesus, are the apostle’s way of reminding the early Christians who they were. In other words, they were not just men and women living under the empirical rule of Roman authority. They were not just a struggling class of people working to make ends meet. Yes, they were these things but Paul reminded them that in the midst of all of that they were “in Christ.” This was their ultimate identity. It was Paul’s hope that when the world looked at the Ephesian congregation and asked, “Who is that? Who are those people?” the mark of their life “in Christ” would be obvious. This is who they were. To make it even more clear, Paul taught that the plans the Ephesians made for their lives were connected to God’s plan. You are “in Christ” he wrote, reminding them that wherever they went and whatever they did and whatever they hoped for was not just about their personal wishes but God’s hope for them. Note what Paul writes. He says they were “blessed...in Christ with every spiritual blessing” so they would “accomplish all things according to his counsel and will” and that they would “live for the praise of his glory.” The Ephesians lived in Christ and remembering that helped them not forget who they were.

To assure the Ephesians understood their life “in Christ” the apostle used another strategy to remind the people who they were. Before we talk about Paul’s strategy let me share something that connects to my family in a different way. I have a number of ball caps. I like to wear them first thing in the morning before getting all put together for the day. I’ve never revealed this publically, but the cap I choose to wear each morning relates to what’s going to happen that day. It’s a sort of intentional strategy to connect the beginning of the day with what will come later. If we’re going to see one of our children, I’ll pick a cap of one of colleges or universities they graduated from. If we’re going to connect with one of our favorite family vacation spots, I’ll put that cap on. If we are planning on getting together to watch the Buckeyes play football, even though I didn’t go to that school, I’ve got an Ohio State cap I wear. Like I say, it’s a personal strategy to connect the start of my day with who we’ll see or what we’ll do or where we’ll go. Paul had a strategy to connect the Ephesians in this world with what God would make possible in the world to come. Paul called them saints. Greetings to “the saints,” Paul writes at the beginning of his letter. As we’ve heard today, Paul writes, “I heard of your love...toward all the saints...” and Paul affirmed that God called them to a “glorious inheritance among the saints...” We don’t have to wait to get to heaven. We are saints, now, Paul believed, living in Christ and infused with God’s presence such that the things of earth and the things of heaven come together.

We are in Christ and we are in communion with all the saints. This is who we are now and who we will be then. I choose by daily ballcap to prepare me to enter into what’s coming, and in an infinitely more profound way

we lift up the dearly departed today and share in communion with all the saints because it prepares us to enter more fully into what God is doing both now and in the life to come.

In just a few moments we will speak the names and light a candle for those who have died. There will be other names that each of us will call to mind. We'll call them to mind but the real meaning comes because we hold those we remember in our hearts. Our loved ones are not with us in this world but they are still with us. We are comforted because we know those we have loved and lost are found in God. They know the fullness of heaven's joy and even though we're not there yet we are connected to them in Christ. Even now, the light of heaven is shining in us. Today we are with all the saints. It's who we are. It's who we will be.

Thanks be to God.