

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Stewardship Sunday – October 22nd and 25th, 2009

Ephesians 1:15-23

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Dear Chosen people of God,

What thoughts come to mind when you hear the word inheritance? For most of us the word inheritance makes us think about those things of our parents and grandparents that we would like to have as a reminder of their lives when they are dead and gone. Maybe it is a piece of furniture that we always liked or the old '47 Chevy Truck your dad and you restored (well, tried to restore) in the summer of whatever year or one of the many old co-op hats your grandpa used to wear. You know the list. You probably have one of your own. Maybe the word inheritance makes you also think about things that you have already inherited from your parents. Like your stubbornness, your values and, of course, your pretty eyes or hair or your rugged good looks.

But if we were truthful, most of us would have to admit that it's not too long after these kinds of thoughts that our mind wanders into inheritance fantasy land. Wouldn't it be nice to get a letter from the estate of a long lost billionaire relative?

Dear Mark,

Your late uncle had a particular fondness for the pastoral ministry. He heard that you were a pastor and wanted you to never have to worry about money again. Enclosed is a check for \$10,000,000. Use it wisely. Sincerely, Bob & Bob Law Firm

Ahh ...wouldn't that be great? I would have all I would never need, and of course the church would be well taken care of, too! Well, I am sorry to say that such a letter has not arrived as of yet and I do not hold out much hope for such a letter in the future. All the people I'm related to would have to live to be about 2000 years old in order to be a billionaire.

However, I do have some exciting news for you today. What would you say if told you that I have before me a letter about an inheritance that will really change the outlook around here -- both for you personally and for the church as a whole? I will interpret your silence and stoic faces as uncontrollable excitement. Let me say that the letter is not exactly from a law firm nor is it from the estate of some billionaire or even a millionaire. It's from a rather poor tentmaker named Paul, who lived about 2000 years ago. It was written to the Ephesians and Christians everywhere about our inheritance that comes from our heavenly Father. Today we will see from God's Word that we have many reasons to say:

Theme: Thank You Heavenly Father!

- 1. For giving us your inheritance**
- 2. For giving us your power**

Paul starts out this wonderful news for us by writing, **"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance...so that we...might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit."** Did you hear that? We HAVE received an inheritance from Jesus! So, what exactly might that inheritance be? Well, it's not a check or a house or a piece of property. It's not a set of antique china or a collection of prize-winning rose bushes. It is however, a priceless inheritance. When Jesus died, he left us with something that is wonderful. In his death, he gave us a new life. He gave us a new name. He gave us the gift of faith. He's given us admission to the great banquet -- the eternal meal we will share with one another in heaven.

And today we are going to see that we can say thank you for this most treasured of inheritances that we have received from Jesus Christ: our sainthood. That's right! You and I are included among the list of saints -- those set apart by God through the blood of Jesus. That's right we can say boldly that we are to be counted among the list of saints. It's not that we have been model citizens or always dedicated ourselves to the cause of faith without wavering or stumbling. We count ourselves among the saints for the same reason we count anyone among the saints: because we have inherited such sainthood from Jesus Christ. It's right there in the will.

And we gather each week around God's Word and Sacraments to hear the reading of' that will -- time and time again -- to celebrate and remember with thankfulness all that we have inherited as well as all the other wonderful gifts that God has given us in our daily lives such as food, clothing, home, family, work. Indeed, we've got a lot to be thankful for.

I said earlier that this inheritance would change the outlook around here. I wasn't lying or kidding or even exaggerating. How can this be? Simply put: People who have heard this word about what we have inherited from Jesus Christ know that all they have is from God -- and even more, they know that they have all that they need. When we stop and really count all that we have inherited from God, there is no way that we can talk about ourselves as being poor. Rather, we have abundance. And out of that abundance you and I are called to thank our God. And how can we say thank you?

Many of you have heard about this inheritance from God and know that you have all that you need -- spiritually and materially. Each week we witness on average around 600 of God's saints gathered here in God's house at St. Luke's to say thank you for the inheritance that our Heavenly Father has given them. What a miracle to see people like you hearing God's Word and singing songs of praise and thanks to thank our good and gracious God. It is nothing but a miracle that each week the members of St. Luke's bring thank offerings that are given out of love for their God who has given them everything. These thank offerings are evidence that God's love is in your hearts. It is the inheritance of God's love and forgiveness that moves the people of St. Luke's to bring almost \$1,000,000 every year to do the Lord's work here at St. Luke's and around the world. These fruits of your faith are saying thank you loud and clear.

I can say boldly that such acts are evidence that faith has taken root in your hearts and lives. Indeed, such acts of generosity are not possible without faith. The world may say that the way to get more is to invest wisely and save up all that you can. While wise investments are a good thing, there is a greater truth here. When we give to God out of thanks and love, we gain far more than stock dividends ever could. Don't get me wrong--there's nothing wrong with making a good living, saving for retirement or your kids' college funds. But all too often such activities can easily become the center of our lives -- and when money is the center of your life, you will never have enough. But when you give out of thanks for the inheritance that God has given you, you will realize that we already have all that we need.

Now I know that times are tough. I know that those of you who are older may be struggling to pay for health care and medications with your social security and other limited income. I know that some of you are struggling to keep your kids fed and clothed, paying the mortgage and keeping the car running. I know that some of you have lost your jobs in the last year and others of you in your 50s and 60s got pension statements in the last few weeks and are wondering what this will all mean for your retirement.

So how does all this affect the financial outlook at St. Luke's? Well, outwardly we will never be able to say things are perfect and that we have enough money -- but maybe we need to look somewhere

else first before we look at the outward things. I think we will do much better if we look inwardly first. Inwardly God has filled us with his strength and power. It is the same power that he gave to Jesus his Son who now sits on the heavenly throne ruling in power and might. Listen to the words in God's will from the book of Ephesians, **“And his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”** Did you catch all of that? Our heavenly Father has promised us that he will give us the strength to live in this sinful world. Yes, we have many things that are a daily struggle. Yes, we have many things tempting us from giving God our best in our time, talents and thank offerings. But most importantly, we are not alone in making these decisions. We are living right now with **“his incomparably great power”** in us. We are not alone.

So what does this mean? It means that we first and foremost have to recognize that everything we are and everything we do is guided by God's grace and power. The inheritance of God's forgiveness and salvation are ours as a free gift – nothing we earned or deserved. Everything we do is an opportunity from God to say thank you to our God who has given us everything. This is not always going to be easy. But God has promised to walk with us every step of the way. Every Sunday when we gather together in this house of worship, God is pouring his power into our weak and sinful hearts and minds. Each Sunday that we kneel side by side with fellow believers at the Lord's table, our heavenly Father is pouring his promise of strength into our feeble and sinful hearts – the strength that we so desperately need.

Today is the first of four Sunday's that are dealing with Christian Stewardship. There will be four special sermons as well as four weeks of Bible study on Stewardship. I know that the word, Stewardship, makes some if not most of us slightly uncomfortable. But this word doesn't need to make us feel uncomfortable at all. This word, Stewardship, is a beautiful picture to describe the picture that God who owns all things, allows us as sinful people to be managers of his blessings while on this earth. God is giving us so many opportunities to manage everything that he has given to us out of his grace and mercy. I pray that we will not look at these next four Sundays as something evil and uncomfortable, but rather to look at these Sundays in light of the fact that God has given us so much of his grace and mercy, and we are trying to bring to front the many opportunities that God has given us to say thank you. Instead of coming to these next Stewardship Sundays with preconceived thoughts, I invite you to come and let God's grace fill your hearts. I invite each one of you personally to come downstairs to the Adult Bible Class and learn more about Stewardship – Today's lesson is entitled, “What is Christian Stewardship?” And each of the next three following weeks we will have more opportunities to grow in our faith and lives as Christian stewards.

Dear saints in Christ, we have inherited something far greater and more precious than our parents, grandparents, extended family and friends could ever give us. We have inherited the free gift of eternal life in the form of Jesus Christ, who in his death has given us new life and a reminder that all we have is from God.

Now in view of God's grace found in the inheritance and power he gives us, we are invited to say Thank You Heavenly Father with our words and actions.

Amen