

## **“Becoming Good Ancestors”**

2 Timothy 4:6-8; Hebrews 11:8-16 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 6, 2022  
All Saints Memorial Service

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might consider our legacies and strive to be found faithful. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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I had a thought last week, as we were singing Dick Penny's favorite song. "In remembrance of me, heal the sick; in remembrance of me, feed the poor," it says. It's a communion song, as you know, and so the first verse talks about eating the bread and drinking the wine. But then it broadens out to remind us of other ways of putting the Body of Christ back together. As a communion hymn, it is, of course, about Jesus. But it's not just about Jesus. So it got me thinking, what would it be like to be the kind of person whom others remember by feeding the poor or tending to the sick? How will people remember me? What kind of tribute activity would best honor your life?

It's funny how having this Sunday when we specifically focus on mortality and death reminds us that, in some sense, every Sunday we come to the Table is a day we're focusing on mortality and death. But then the Table points us in another direction, as it shifts the focus to eternity and life. That's the thing about death: in some very real, if confusing ways, it makes time run in multiple directions all at once. There is the blessing of memory, which carries us backwards. But then there is the

reality of moving forward, in a new world without the lost loved one, which is often difficult to face. And that crossroads is where the blessing of legacy intervenes to carry us forward.

Each person we've lost has left us something, a legacy to remember them by. Paul, who seems to have known he was nearing the end of his life, talks about being poured out as a "libation," an offering of drink – usually wine, though around here it would probably be coffee – that is poured out on the ground as a sacrifice to God. He has, he declares, "fought the good fight" and "finished the race." He trusts that his legacy will be one of having "kept the faith," much like Abraham and Sarah's example of faithfulness as described in our reading from Hebrews.

So as we call to mind our own loved ones who have gone on today, we are invited to consider their legacies and to reflect on how we might carry those legacies forward or determine to change our own legacies for the better. One of the theologians who spoke for us at Regional Assembly last month, Dr. Patrick Reyes of the Forum for Theological Education, also goes by the title of "Futurist." Now, I'm not entirely certain what a Futurist is or does, but I think we can guess that they focus their work and thought and research on exploring the future and how to shape it. That sounds likely, right? So it was interesting to me that he started out by talking about ancestors. His point, of course, was that we can't figure out where we're going if we don't know where we're coming from. It was interesting how he talked about history though, because he encouraged us to consider that there are at least three

layers we need to explore, if we really want to understand our past. There are the parts we all already know about, our shared understanding. And there are the parts that need to be shared more widely, because knowledge of them is on the verge of dying out. But then there are also parts that have been intentionally obscured, the ugly parts we might not learn about just by asking great-grandpa to tell us about something. Without learning about all three of these layers, we can't fully sort out the legacies that got us where we are today. And we may not be aware of the legacies we're likely to pass on, if we haven't sorted through the ones we've received.

The thing about the way this learned Futurist talked about ancestors was that while he did want us to connect with our ancestors, he was more interested in helping us to become good ancestors. I wonder if that's a way you've ever thought about yourself before? I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand if you've prepared a will, because that's not really what we're getting at here. (Though preparing a will is always a good idea!) I'm talking about shifting your perspective on your life to include consideration of your legacy. What is the libation of your life being poured out for? Are your choices and values and sacrifices preparing you to become a good ancestor?

I think these are really good questions for us to contemplate, as we move toward next year's milestone anniversary. A congregation could make a 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary all about the last 7 and a half decades. But if we were to approach this celebration in hopes that it will help us become better ancestors, then the focus is shifts to the next 25 or 50 years. We need to examine and celebrate and possibly

repent of the legacies we have received. But more importantly, we need to be intentional and clear about the legacies we are creating today, the ones that will carry this congregation into God's future. We may not know who our descendants will be, but we can choose what kind of legacy is going to shape their faith, by the choices we are making about our own faithfulness right now. We can seek diligently for the promises God is offering, which may seem far off, and live our lives in such a way that our descendants will see those promises brought to fruition.

What is the promise that God is offering, that causes us to aim for a legacy of feeding the poor and tending the sick? Can we believe in a promise of a day when no one will go hungry and all those who are ailing will be cared for with generous compassion? Believing in that day is what inspires us to feed the poor around us right now. This is a legacy we've received from those who've gone before us. I think of Carol Biederman, who was practically an ancestor when I first met her. Now that name may not ring a bell for you, because Carol Biederman didn't go to VLM. But Carol is really the great-grandmother of Welcome Saturday. It was Carol's dream and determination that got the monthly homeless ministry started at First United Methodist of La Mesa that Welcome Saturday is based on. She kept it going there for a few years, and showed up every month at the Interfaith Council meetings to exhort those of us in other congregations to claim another Saturday and get going. I don't think Carol lived much longer after we finally got Welcome Saturday launched in 2016, but I hope it gave her joy to know that her legacy had been passed on.

If we're going to talk about legacies of feeding the poor, on this All Saints Sunday, we must pay homage, as well, to Body By Bacon. That was the proclamation on the t-shirt that Walter Rorie-Baety wore every month for Welcome Saturday, where he was our faithful socks & undies man for so long. It was a celebration and an invitation – a reminder of the abundance of God that we do our best to offer our neighbors without shelter every second Saturday. “Bacon Bacon” our guests named us, and Walter’s shirt promised them that their understanding of who we are was not mis-placed. A legacy of hospitality is a blessing indeed, a libation – perhaps of bacon grease? – poured out in honor of the welcome God offers all of us.

So as we sit here on All Saints, in this in-between space where time extends out around us in all directions, let us direct our attention to the promises on the eastern horizon – the sunrise of the future, rather than the sunset of the past. Let us settle our feet firmly in the legacies of faithfulness we have been given, not for their own sake, but for the sake of those who will come after us. Let us have the difficult conversations to determine which parts of our legacy are blessing and which are burdens that need to be set down. Let us name and claim who God is calling us to become, not for our own sake only, but for the sake of our descendants. Let us think carefully and prayerfully about what is worth pouring our lives out for. What is the fight worth fighting? What is the race that will lead to that promise in the distance? How do we want to be remembered? Let us endeavor to become good ancestors, that God’s faithfulness might be proclaimed. Hallelujah and Amen.