

“A Heritage Worth Claiming”
Ephesians 1:11–23
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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In his book *Leaving Home*, Garrison Keillor includes a story entitled “Royal Family” in which a sensible young woman named Grace Tollefson makes the mistake of marrying a young man named Alex Campbell. He is a handsome, green-eyed fellow who drives a 1936 Singer coupe, but he has no prospects. He keeps a bottle of whiskey in the trunk and laughs too loud, but even though her family is opposed, Grace falls for him, marries him, and has three children with him.

Unfortunately, the Tollefsons are right about Alex. He leaves her one day after she locks him out when he comes home drunk, again, and Grace has to move back to town and live off the charity of her family and the Lutheran church in a green mobile home they acquire for her. People walk by her each day with a look that says, “We were right. We told you. Now look at you.” It is a humiliating existence.

Years later, she receives a letter from a man in Philadelphia doing research on Scottish nobility. The letter’s greeting is to Mrs. Grace Campbell, but the envelope is addressed to Your Royal Highness. The writer greets her as his sovereign queen and says she is the first in line of succession in the House of Stewart, the Royal Family of Scotland. He includes a large genealogy map and a check for \$15 for the courtesy of a few more family details. Grace is not convinced, she tells her children to say nothing to anyone yet, but she is intrigued. To think of it — the Royal Family of Scotland living in a mobile home in Lake Wobegon!

As it turns out, Alex has written the letter. He calls one day because he needs financial help, again, this time because he has been charged with mail fraud. He confesses that he sent the letter because he wanted them to be proud of their family... so that he didn’t have to come crawling back. But only the oldest son hears this, and he decides not to tell his mother and siblings. It is better that they hold on to hope, to the possibility that they might have a heritage worth claiming.

Our reading today from Ephesians 1 says that we have a heritage worth claiming, but it is not a form of mail fraud. It is from God in Christ, marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit, guaranteed as good for our future hope and present experience. All of this needs a little unpacking, but the impact is like the one in Garrison Keillor's story, only this message is genuine and enduring.

After summarizing all that Jesus accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection, the author says that in Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined for a life filled with hope. Verses 11–14 are the second half of one sentence in Greek that begins with verse 3. It is the longest sentence in the Christian Testament, and it is a bit convoluted. So, let me try to summarize what it says.

It says that our inheritance or heritage includes forgiveness and transformation, hope for eternal life, and a purpose for being. It propels us onto a different path, the one Jesus describes in the reading from Luke where we love our enemies, pray for those who harm us, give to those who beg, and do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And it gives us an identity, a place to belong, a family.

In other words, what we experience in Christ not only gives us hope for life after death, it radically alters the nature of this life. It fills each day with meaning, purpose, and community. This is our inheritance, the text says, our heritage, our family history.

Dana's uncle traced their family back to William the Conqueror. So, Dana may be the one true queen. I certainly treat her that way! I am a descendent of John Sevier, the first governor of Tennessee, which is a big deal, but not quite as big as being heir to the throne of England. Of course, we all have horse thieves and bank robbers in our lineage too...

When the author of Ephesians talks about our inheritance, he is talking about something like this. It is the only use of this word in the Christian Testament. It refers to being chosen by lots. We prefer the NRSV's use of "inheritance" or perhaps "heritage." Either term feels better than being chosen for redemption by a roll of the dice! But Israel's "allotment" by God in the Septuagint is more than a role of the dice. It is an act of God's providential care and blessing.

We might say we are “adopted” by God, which is another term the author of Ephesians uses, saying just before our reading that we are destined for adoption as God’s children in Christ. So, we are part of a royal family, the most royal family, and we are all a part of it. Each of us is claimed in love and valued highly by our Creator. No one needs to have a humiliating experience. No one is to be looked down on.

In his book *The Struggle to Be Free*, Wayne Oates described how he came to embrace this reality after an experience at Mars Hill College.

The Word of God, the Logos, the person of Jesus Christ, was my redemption from feelings of inferiority. From then on, I felt it a divine imperative never to think of any human being as inferior to me, nor, at the same time, ever to think of any human being as superior to me. From then on, I began to look *across* at all people. I work at this as my daily discipline; to walk *humbly* with God and *comradely* with people. For all of us are made in the image of God. All of us are bought with the same price of the death of Jesus Christ. All of us who were once ‘no people’ are now ‘the people of God.’ (p. 43)

We are the people of God. We have a rich heritage in Christ, says Ephesians. We have meaning and purpose today and hope for eternity.

It’s a lovely claim, but how do we know it’s true? According to Ephesians, because we have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. Evidence for the authenticity of this claim about heritage is found not in rational arguments or bold persuasion, but in the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. A seal provides a guarantee of authenticity from a state official. God’s guarantee is a part of God’s self living in us.

We all face ultimate questions at some point — about whether God exists, whether this life is all there is, whether our life has enduring value. In this culture, we can avoid them for a long time, think we believe certain things, but not have those beliefs tested. But at some point — cued by the loss of a loved one, our own impending mortality, or some tragic event — we are pushed to wonder what we really believe.

Being summoned for jury duty this week pushed me to ask some questions. Twelve of us who were potential jurors were asked if we had family members or close friends who had been victims of assault. One woman's husband had been shot and killed, another woman and her husband had been held up at gunpoint, another person's daughter had been held at gunpoint by his son-in-law, everyone knew a victim of assault. This was twelve random people from all over Wake County, an image of life in America, and a reminder of just how frail life is.

When we realize this, how do we know our God talk, heaven language, and precious life verbiage is genuine? Remembering what we were taught long ago helps. Jesus' teachings are of great value. But if we have an experience with God's Spirit, that is what convinces us. We may be in a hospital room with a loved one and suddenly sense we are not alone. We may be weighed down with grief when the tears begin to flow and our burden is lightened. But somehow, we know God is with us in Spirit, and because God is, everything will be okay.

C. S. Lewis provides an image of the Spirit in his book *The Horse and His Boy* (p. 158f). A boy named Shasta learns the identity of the Lion who has helped him. It is Aslan, a Christ figure, but his identity is concealed for a time. As the boy anxiously walks through a mountainous region, a fog sets in. To heighten his anxiety, he senses the presence of another but does not know if the other is friendly or not.

"Who are you?" asks the boy in a frightened whisper. "One who has waited long for you," says a voice, not loud but strong and deep. "Are you — are you a giant?" asks the boy. "You might call me a giant," says the Large Voice, "But I am not like the creatures you call giants." "You're not something dead, are you?" says the boy, "O please go away... What harm have I done to you?" The boy feels the warm breath of the Other and the Voice says, "There... That is not the breath of a ghost... Tell me your sorrows." So, he does and learns the Other is Aslan, the King of Kings, the one who has helped him all along his journey in ways he did not realize until now.

This is who the Spirit is, the One who comforts, guides and strengthens us, and in the process, lets us know our belief is genuine, our future is secure, we have a heritage worth claiming.