

# Jesus and His Friends

Ephesians 1:11-23

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to add my words of welcome to our sisters and brothers from Springridge Mennonite Church. We wish you could be here but glad we can connect in some way via technology.

I was going to begin by giving our guests a bit of a window into what Lethbridge Mennonite regulars already know about my preaching style.

There are three themes that tend to appear with some regularity:

1. **I repeat myself from time to time.** Sometimes this is because I am forgetful. More often it is because I am convinced that we need to hear the best and truest and most life-giving things more than once.
2. **I often quote people smarter than me and who say things better than I could.** I am always on the hunt for people who are communicating old truths in compelling and beautiful ways.
3. **I refer to rock and roll with some regularity. Perhaps more than some might prefer.** ☺ If I wasn't a pastor, I would have wanted to be a rock star (you can ask Naomi if you doubt this). Sadly, I had neither the talent nor the hair for this vocation. But I am always hunting around in popular music for spiritual themes. I'm convinced that, as the famous singer from U2 Bono put it in an interview this week, "All art is religious to me, even bad art is revealing." <sup>1</sup>

I'm going to cover all three of these bases this morning. I am going to quote an author I have referred to several times in past sermons (this will cover both the repeating myself part and the quoting people smarter than me part).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/03/books/review/the-book-that-hastened-bonos-puberty-in-a-good-way.html>

And I'm also going to dig around a bit in something that the aforementioned Bono said in an interview about his recently published memoir called *Surrender*.

I'm going to wrap it all up in a tidy bow and anchor it in our Scripture reading from Ephesians. That's the plan, anyway ☺

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So, as we've already heard this morning, this past Wednesday was "All Saints" or "All Souls Day" or, if you go back far enough into Christian history, "All Hallows Day."

It is marked by many churches on November 1 each year, the day after Halloween or, historically, "All Hallows Eve" which preceded it.

There's a whole history around this little window of the Christian calendar, and a bit of dubious theology that rose up over time around the souls of the dead and purgatory, none of which we have time to get into or which are relevant to us this morning.

But at its best, All Saints was a reminder that as Christians we are part of a broad company of fellow pilgrims, stretching across space and time, comprised of both the living and the dead.

It reminds us that we are a part of the larger body of Christ, that faith isn't a Lone Ranger individual pursuit, but a shared one.

(I fear that we often forget this, particularly in our hyper-individualistic times, but that's another sermon.)

I'm not sure what you make of all this. Mennonites tend not to think of or refer to themselves as saints. We're far too humble, or at least wracked with guilt to apply the language of "saints" to ourselves.

And what is a "saint" anyway? Someone who did a miracle or had a church named after them. Maybe you think it's for all those "high church" folks, but not for us.

But in the New Testament, the word simply refers to members of the body of Christ, those who have been set apart, made holy not by anything of their own merit, but by what Jesus had accomplished on their behalf.

“Every follower of Jesus Christ is a saint. Paul often refers to the recipients of his letters as “saints,” including the church at Corinth, where the people were acting *far* from saintly!

And so, as we were planning what we anticipated being a shared service today, we thought it might work well to incorporate it into a time where the saints from Lethbridge and from Pincher Creek will be coming together in worship.

We should indeed celebrate the broad family of faith that has passed the Christian story on to us and made faith possible in our time. Each one of us no doubt has a cast of characters in mind—family, friends, people from the churches of your childhood, those who give the churches we’ve been a part of or are presently a part of its unique shape and character.

Ephesians 1:11-23 is one of the texts chosen for All Saints Day. It is a text that looks both backward and forward.

**Backward:**

- you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation
- you believed in him
- you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people
- 1:15” I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.

Heard, believed, were marked. These are past tense. They describe what has already happened.

**Forward:** Paul prays that God would give the church in Ephesus wisdom and that they would come to know the hope to which we have been called.

This implies a forward oriented process of ongoing discovery and maturity and growth.

In the end, this is what a saint is. Not someone with a halo over their head, but someone who knows the hope which has been passed down to us and to which we have been called.

This is why saints gather in worship each week around the world. This is who we are.

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So, on to the quote from someone who can say it better than I can that I referred to earlier.

Benjamin Myers is an Australian theologian that I admire. Way back in the early 2000s when blogging was a new exciting thing, he had a blog called *Faith and Theology* was one of my favourites.

A few years ago, he wrote a little book containing reflections on each line of the Apostle's Creed, this declaration of faith that Christians around the world, saints of every description, accept as conveying the core essentials of Christian doctrine and teaching.

This is from the chapter based on the portion of the creed that goes, "I believe in the communion of saints." I've used portions of it in a previous sermon, but I think it's worth hearing again:

Jesus wrote no books... Everything Jesus believed to be important was entrusted to his small circle of followers. What he handed on to them was simply life. He showed them his own unique way of being alive—his way of living, loving, feasting, forgiving, teaching, and dying—and he invited them to live the same way.

Becoming a Christian is not really about institutional membership or about adopting a system of ideas. To become a Christian is to be included in the circle of Jesus' followers. I am washed with the same bath that Jesus and his followers have had. I get to share the same meal that Jesus shared with his followers. Four of Jesus' followers have left written records of what he said and what he was like, and I get to spend my life continually pondering these four accounts. I read them not because I am studying ideas about Jesus but because I am studying him. I want everything in my life, right down to the smallest and most disappointing details, to enter somehow into communion with the life of Jesus.

I share the holy bath and the holy meal, and I read the holy stories because I am seeking Jesus. But when I do these things, I am also seeking myself. I want to

find myself among the circle of Jesus' followers. I want to be wherever Jesus is—and he is in the company of his friends. I want my whole life to be “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). I want my life's small story to be tucked into the folds of Jesus' story.

When this happens, my life acquires a meaning beyond itself. I begin to see myself as part of a great company, an ever-widening circle of people who have handed their lives over to the pattern of Jesus' life...

The Fourth Gospel ends by telling us that it has offered only a glimpse of Jesus. If everything Jesus did was written down, “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

Perhaps at the end of the age, the Total Gospel will be read out and will be found to contain everything—every life, every story, every human grief and joy, all included as episodes in the one great, infinitely rich story of Jesus and his friends. The world itself is too small for such a book. Life and death are too small for the communion of saints.<sup>2</sup>

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I return to that chapter often. It expresses so beautifully who we are as the body of Christ, whether it's two small congregations in Mennonite Church Alberta, or our Christian sisters and brothers from denominations around the world.

*The infinitely rich story of Jesus and his friends.* What an absolutely marvelous description of the church.

It gathers up both the backward and the forward that I spoke of earlier, both the saints who preceded us and who passed it along to us, and the path ahead.

This is not to say that they or we are perfect. The church is comprised not of squeaky-clean saints in the way the term is often understood.

Paul often referred to himself both as a sinner and a saint because he knew he was both. He found an inner battle within himself between the right that he wanted to

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Myers, *The Apostles' Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 109-11.

choose and the wrong that he often *in fact* chose (Romans 7 is among the best descriptions of the conflicted nature of human existence in all of literature).

The same is true of us. If we've spent any time at all in the church, we know that it is an imperfect institution. Each one of us is the product of flawed churches that didn't get everything right.

We suffered through bad Sunday School classes. We were taught things that we may question today. The faith we have today may not precisely map on to that of our forefathers and foremothers.

The point is the pursuit. The point is to keep moving in Jesus' direction. Even when we stumble, even when we make mistakes, even when we have doubts, even when we have to unlearn some things.

I've been a big fan of U2 since I was a teenager. I think their 1987 album *The Joshua Tree* was among my first rock and roll cassette tapes! I couldn't get enough of that album.

I've followed them ever since, seen them live a few times. They're getting a bit older now (I think they're in their early sixties). Which, I suppose means that I'm getting older, too.

They're apparently at the stage of their career where you start to write your memoirs. This week I read a review of Bono's memoir in *The Atlantic*. It's called, simply *Surrender*.

The reviewer tells the story about how the band got together as teenagers, how they achieved a measure of fame, and then a few of them converted to a charismatic brand of Christianity.

This marked a crossroads in their story. Some of them didn't see how they could be both believer and in a famous rock band. Back and forth they went, and it wasn't at all clear that they would go forward together.

Well, they did in fact stay together for a while. Like, forty or so years.

But I was surprised to learn that the tension identified in those early years has never gone away. They have always struggled to reconcile "the humility of faith with the

egotism of superstardom, the purity of the Holy Spirit with the material excess of show business, the drive to achieve musical greatness with the posture of surrender to grace.”

One quote in particular stood out to me from this review.

Bono’s memoir can be read as a spiritual adventure story... it is called *Surrender*, and this act of surrendering himself to a higher love remains a guiding hope in his life.

“I’d always be first up when there was an altar call, the ‘come to Jesus’ moment,” he writes in the book. “I still am. If I was in a café right now and someone said, ‘Stand up if you’re ready to give your life to Jesus,’ I’d be first to my feet. I took Jesus with me everywhere and I still do.”<sup>3</sup>

I read those last lines and I thought, “I want that to describe, me too. I want to stand up and be counted among the circle of Jesus and his friends. I want to take Jesus with me everywhere I go. I want to surrender to that higher love, that guiding hope in my life, too.

I hope that Paul’s prayer for the saints in Ephesus would be answered in us and in our time as well.

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.

I hope that what Ben Myers and Bono and the Apostle Paul are all saying in their own ways describes us, too, the saints from Lethbridge Mennonite gathered together on cold November Sunday morning and the saints from Springridge Mennonite who are watching online.

I pray that we, too, would say that we are part of the infinitely rich story of Jesus and his friends.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/u2-bono-memoir-surrender/671894/>

I pray that we, too, would say be the first our feet if someone were to say, "Stand up if you're ready to give your life to Jesus."

I pray that we, too, would take Jesus with us everywhere, and that as we do discover that they eyes of our heart indeed are opened.

I pray most of all that we, the circle of Jesus' friends, would know the glorious hope to which we have been called.

It is a good and glorious hope. All things made new. Creation healed and restored. Sins forgiven. Life and love victorious over death and fear.

Amen.

