

First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament on All Saints Sunday

[OR Sainty/Sinnery Wisdom and Understanding with a Dash of Love]

Ephesians 1:11-23

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on November 6, 2022

I miss my mother-in-law this time of year. Carol died seven days after Thanksgiving in 2018.¹ She loved autumn, decorating tables with mini pumpkins along with dried leaves and seed pods of all kinds. We spent Thanksgiving with them during most of their time in Grand Junction. After I received this call to Augustana, they started coming here for Thanksgiving Eve worship and Pie Fest, adding their cans of chili to the pile. Carol's sparkly, cornflower blue eyes were usually full of mischief. Between her salt of the earth Iowa farm girl ways and her salty language, she couldn't be pegged into any one category. She was saint and sinnery in her own way. Carol's last Thanksgiving included her attempt to help Rob with the turkey as he came through the sliding glass door, almost scalding herself in the process. You can take the woman out of the Iowa farm, but you can't take the Iowa farm out of the woman. She was ready to wrestle Rob for the turkey pan although she no longer had the strength to do so. I had the instant reaction to yell, "Carol, NO! What part of 'don't touch the turkey' do you not understand!" It was one of two of my most disrespectful interactions with her. The second of which was the prior Thanksgiving in a similar turkey incident.

After dinner, when she had taken her usual position at the kitchen sink (I tried to get her to sit down for 30 years), I put my arm around her shoulders and told her that I was sorry for yelling at her. She put her head on my shoulder, and said, "Aww, hon, I don't even remember that – I love you." I said, "I love you, too." Seven days later, I couldn't have been more grateful for that exchange at the kitchen sink. I'm still grateful for it and for having her in my life. Carol was the first person to ask when Rob and I were "baptizing that baby." We'd both been away from church awhile and it honestly wasn't our first thought. But, oh, I'm so glad she did. Baptizing Quinn and then Taryn enfolded us in a church community that we're forever grateful for. The gospel was preached in love there. I received it as such and here I stand preaching today. It all started with baptism.

¹ <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/gjsentinel/name/carol-trussell-obituary?id=10109452>

The baptismal liturgy has pieces of the Ephesians reading. There's a prayer after the water part when the pastor places their hands on the head of the baptized and prays:

"Sustain them with the gift of your Holy Spirit, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever. Amen."

The prayer in Ephesians asks that God "give a spirit of wisdom and revelation."² The baptism liturgy helps us with that word "revelation" by using the word "understanding." Revelation means to see something new or in a new way. Understanding is the ability to interpret that new thing. A spirit of wisdom and understanding. Biblical translation and word choices are interesting. In seminary, pastors are trained in Greek and sometimes Hebrew to understand the original biblical texts. Martin Luther was the first to translate Greek and Hebrew into the German Bible. His sense of his own sin overpowered him, making God's grace all the sweeter for him. Every translation makes word choices to convey meaning which is why biblical literalism is a fool's errand. But wisdom and understanding, now those are possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wisdom and understanding come from experience, teaching, learning, prayer, and more. Wisdom and understanding come from having your mind blown when you think you already have the answers, being humbled by new information that doesn't fit into your current thinking. A recent example in my own life includes reading portions of the new First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament.^{3 4} First Nations is a term that started in Canada for original inhabitants of the land interchangeably called American Indians or Native Americans. The term has been accepted and used by some people in the U.S. and all over the world. The translation council, along with other First Nation people who provided feedback, represented a variety of tribes, ages, genders, denominations, and geographic locations to reduce bias.

² Ephesians 1:17

³ Terry M. Wildman. First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament (Downers Grove, Illinois: First Varsity Press, 2021).

⁴ I'm pretty grateful for Don Troike, Augustana member and retired Biology professor, who told me about the First Nations Version and lent me his copy.

The First Nations Version is dedicated to healing people through the “good story,” people who have suffered at the hands of our colonizing government helped by churches and missionaries, who stole their land, language, culture, and children.⁵ The beauty of this new version of the New Testament is hard to describe because the words and flow have the cadence of First Nation storytelling. It would be ridiculous for me to try as a White pastor of Scandinavian and Irish descent. But much like the original and utterly scandalous German translation was liberating to 16th century Germans, and the variety of English translations find their way into English-speaking hearts, the First Nation Version attempts to do so for First Nation peoples. This new translation is one more way that the Holy Spirit brings wisdom and understanding through the diversity of the baptized.

Wisdom and understanding come through baptism which includes the theology of saint and sinner. If you hang around Lutheran Christians long enough, you’ll inevitably hear that phrase “Saint and Sinner.” The fancy pants way to say it (or tattoo ink it) is, “Simul iustus et peccator,” or “Simultaneously justified and sinner.” This means that we are both saint and sinner at the same time because of Christ’s righteousness bestowed on us in baptism and our simultaneous capacity to sin against ourselves and our neighbors. If you read into the next verses of Ephesians, after the sainty parts in our reading today, you’ll get to the trespass and sin part. When I’m out in the community or formally welcoming folks at the beginning of a funeral, I’ll sometimes bring greetings or welcome “from the Sinner/Saints of Augustana Lutheran Church.” The phrase is just confusing enough to make it intriguing, while at the same time acknowledging who we are in the world.

On All Saints Sunday we acknowledge the saints who have died, completing their baptismal journeys and celebrating in the company of all the saints in light. This is not to say that they were perfect people doing miraculous things. Rather, it’s to say that God’s promises through their baptisms draw them ever closer to God right on through their last breath. I find myself in both grief and gratitude on All Saints Sunday. I think of the people who are named in worship and their impact

⁵ Read about First Nation history of boarding schools and the ELCA’s confession and intentions here: <https://religionnews.com/2022/08/11/reckoning-with-role-in-boarding-schools-elca-makes-declaration-to-indigenous-peoples/>

on my own faith and on our congregation. I think of the people I still miss – my father, stepfather, in laws, grandparents, friends, and patients.

And I think about the sinner/saints who persevered in faithfulness as the church so that I could hear a word of grace in Jesus Christ when I most needed it. I'm here because of their word of grace and their words of wisdom and understanding. I'm in awe of the wisdom of our youngest sinner/saints who bless us with their thinking week after week on the Sanctuary steps, right through to our eldest elders who we visit in their homes. I'm bowled over by the wisdom and understanding of sinner/saints who write or podcast about their faith and experience with the God of grace. I'm transformed by sinner/saints around the world and right here at home who speak different cultural and actual languages to talk about Jesus and his self-sacrificing love of us. All of us. Every single last one of us until, at the end of our baptismal journeys, God will bring us through the death and resurrection of Jesus into the company of all the saints in light.

All the wisdom and understanding in the world is just noise if we do not have love. The Ephesians letter in our reading today thanks the church for their love and their faith before praying that they receive wisdom and understanding. This is a time in the world when we need our sinner/saints who pray for us and who teach us to pray from that love. Much like the prayers for the Ephesians taught us to pray. Much like Carol taught me the prayers that were passed down through their family to her. Not perfect. Just perfectly loved by God and imperfectly lived out God's love. I'm grateful for them. And I'm grateful for you, dear sinner/saints, as we get to be church with and for each other in these weird times in the world. Thanks be to God. And amen.