

# Sermon for All Saints Day

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Trick or Treat, I am not sure which you are expecting this morning or, for that matter, which you are going to get. You may have heard the old phrase last Friday night as young costumed beggars knocked on your door or rang your doorbell. Most of us have fond memories of family or neighborhood times going from door to door with little fear of what was actually put in our goody bag. My sister and I always wanted Mom to drive us down to the condos at the end of the street, where the rich retirees lived. That was the place where you could get full size candy bars and the best goodies!

Though historical information is sketchy, those who study the subject believe the practice of trick or treating comes from the Middle Ages, when the poor would go from door to door receiving food in exchange for their prayers for the families' departed, the dead, in order to help them get into heaven and out of purgatory. In some places it was called souling, and took place on November 1, or Hallowmass, with the prayers for the deceased being offered the next day, November 2, on All Souls Day.

This idea of "praying for the dead" has come to fascinate me. As a young, conservative evangelical, I laughed at what I thought was the sheer stupidity of those Latter Day Saints and the Catholics who practiced this. THEY ARE DEAD. What good can you do them? It seemed to me, at least at the time, to be one of the most irrational, illogical things a person could do. As an avid reader of fantasy and science fiction, I should have been more open minded. Many of us believe that prayer, first and foremost, changes the person doing the praying. So praying for those who are no longer with us may be a way of resolving issues we had with the departed as we meditate on the person before God. It may change us as we remember the deceased. As I've experimented with it, especially in praying for my deceased father, I've come to believe that it may be a powerful opportunity for healing and closure.

Another thing that opened my mind about this is my constantly evolving understanding of who God is. The "I AM THAT I AM" statement of God found in Exodus 3:14 is one that challenges me each time I think or meditate on it. "I BE THAT I BE" is another translation of the verse. What is interesting to me is how the Hebrew here is very timeless. God is now, was, and will be, not at different times but always. We forget that though God operates in time in our creation, God created time and is beyond it. So if God is, was, and will be, and is beyond our understanding of time, God is interacting and/or observing events and persons in the totality of their existence, not limited by time, so our prayers communicate with One who is, and was, and will be. Now, while I do not want you to tell Larry and Carolyn that Rodney started prayer services for the dead in their absence, I will admit to dabbling with prayers for the dead as a legitimate form of prayer. Just a side note for you to ponder.

Well, we just had three days together, that we may or may not have celebrated, this weekend. October 31, Halloween or All Hallows Eve, the evening before All Hallows or All Saints Day. That is November 1, with its prayers and celebrations in honor of the saints. Then comes All Soul's Day, November 2, when, according to the medieval Catholic Church, those who have died while still in their sin await purification and admittance to heaven.

It is easy to see how this focus on death led to the ghosts and spooks and ghouls that were, and are, associated with the dead, these symbols of our fears of death and the process of dying that we may have seen prowling our streets last Friday evening.

When it comes to our religious traditions associated with death, our funerals can be strange things. You may have heard me say that between weddings and funerals, I would much rather officiate at a funeral. Weddings are celebrations where you go to bless the union with your presence. No one pays much attention, and most there are too nervous or giddy to hear anything that is said or done. Though funerals and funeral traditions differ from place to place I have always felt that by my attendance, I was seeking and hoping to show the presence of Christ, especially when I was there officiating. I also feel like I am able to do some good at a funeral, hopefully bringing comfort through my words or music. Have you noticed how the things you hear said at a funeral reveal a lot about how the person saying them feels or believes about God and death?

"God needed them more than we did."

"God took them."

"It was their time."

"They are better off with God."

These statements reveal a lot of how the person saying them believes and copes with death.

I still get angry about death. I know that to many of us death is just a natural part of the cycle of life and that it is inevitable. One reason it angers me is the seemingly unfair way in which it happens to some, often too soon or when the person has so much more to do with their life. Sometimes it angers me because it takes away the chance of reconciliation or the hope that a relationship will ever be what one may need it to be. For years the verse I Corinthians 15:54 & 55, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" really bothered me. With every death I felt the sting of death, often in a literal physical pain as I experienced grief and separation from one I loved. I certainly did not feel victorious like I was "supposed" to. I finally came to a point in my life where I could grasp this scripture as a cry of hope, a cry for strength beyond my personal pain.

Here at our church, we look at Christianity as a way of life, as being fellow pilgrims on Christ's road. But many come to Christianity as literally a way of life instead of death. Many come to the faith to be saved from death, from hell, and to "find" eternal life. Some may come to the faith during a time of grieving and loss, seeking comfort and hope in the Christian faith. That was a starting point in my life for my faith. Wanting to go to heaven and have eternal life. Others come to the faith to overcome fears, addictions, their own destructive behaviors, or as a lifeline in fighting the things that seek to destroy them.

I find it interesting that the one ritual we regularly share with other Christians, Communion or the Lord's Supper, is also a ritual about death. The death of Jesus. In it, Jesus asks us to remember. We should also remember the reason they had gathered was to observe the Passover Seder, the time of remembering the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. Jews gathered for Passover, often in family groups, which this band of disciples certainly had become. And like any family gathering, though we have no record of it, I am sure the talk around the table also included talk of family and friends who had observed the Seder with them before, including some who were no longer alive.

I remember when I did a Communion service at a church about our size, where I had asked the worshipers to come prepared to share what Communion meant to them. What did it mean to their Christianity, their faith and spirituality? What deep theological truths had they learned from and through it? What did they remember that was significant to their faith and spirituality? I was, at least at the time, so disappointed because the majority of those who shared told stories of their remembrances of taking Communion with their families, the parents teaching them about it or their passing on the faith as they explained it to their children. How sweet their feelings were as they shared Communion with family and/or friends, or their family of faith. That was not what I meant or wanted! Where was their understanding of Jesus and his sharing of his life? Where were the deep theological truths? Did these people have no depth? It was not until years later that it hit me, and it hit me hard, what a blind idiot I had been!

Even though most of those gathered were those who had a mature view of Christianity, and even though many of those gathered had left the faith for a time or strongly examined it before making it their own, they were saying that their faith was an inherited one. Not a faith mindlessly passed on or inherited, but a faith that was learned from those who had gone before. The example, practice and understanding of those they had known as family in the faith.

I fear, that with the exception of our funerals, we do not take time to learn from those who have gone before. We forget the example and experience of those who are no longer with us, at least in their body. While most of us would agree that we do not need to pray the deceased into heaven on this All Souls Day, I think it is appropriate and needful to spend time remembering those who have gone before us. What can we learn from them? How can their faith journey enlighten our own? What do we need to resolve in our relationship to them now that they are no longer with us?

Everyone of us in this room has faced death. Some of us in the death of family and friends. A few of us in close calls with our own potential death. Some have recently faced it such as Dr. Barton and his family have in the death of his son, Mike. Many of us have been inspired as we watched Bob Kelly, Ed Woy and Irene Keller Rankin face death in their illnesses, giving us hope that we might show the same dignity and strength that they did. These saints that have gone before us still bring meaning to our faith as individuals and as a church.

I invite you to take a moment to meditate on those who have gone before us, here at our church, and in your other families of faith, as well as in your biological families. Their examples, their way of living the faith. The meaning they gave, and give, our lives. What they taught us to do, or maybe not to do. If you want to say a prayer for or about the deceased, that's OK. It may give you the opportunity to see them and what you can learn from them in a whole new way. Join me in a time of contemplation, prayer and meditation.