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Sermon
November 3, 2013
Park Congregational Church
Worcester, Massachusetts

“The Status of the Dead: An All Saints Sermon”

Scripture Text: Hebrews 11:23-12:2

Dear people of God, trick or treat. I'm not sure which you're expecting this morning, but I hope that it will turn out to be a treat. These past few days are a bit fuzzy for many Christians. Should we be celebrating Halloween or All Saints Day? Might there be a connection between the two? I think there is. And I think the connection centers on an awareness of death.

If you read the “Did You Know?” blurb in the bulletin this morning, you would realize that All Saints Day was originally known as the “Day of the Dead.” No, this was not a day to honor zombies. Originally occurring on the first Sunday after Pentecost, the Western Church changed the date in the 9th century to coincide with the beginning of the festival to honor the dead that many European clans celebrated during the first part of November. The Church's observance of a vigil the night before All Saints Day was All Hallows Eve, which we today know as Halloween.

Though many Christians find it difficult to believe, Halloween was

originally a Christian holiday. Though it's true that many popular Halloween customs date back to the pre-Christian Celts and Druids of Ireland and Britain, according to the best scholarship, there's no evidence that our present Halloween celebration is a direct descendant of any pagan festival. Yes, European Christians from the 9th century promoted All Saints Day to replace various pagan practices, but they did the same thing with Christmas and Easter. I don't know of many Christians who object to the celebrations of Christmas and Easter, do you?

Though it's too late for this year, I'm thinking that maybe next year around Halloween, I might have a Holy Halloween service. It probably won't be on a Sunday morning, but it would be a service along the lines of dealing with the darkness of our lives and the shadows of fear and terror both within our own souls and in the world at large, and celebrating the victory over the darkness which we have because of the light that Christ brings. I might even invite those who attend to wear a mask for worship to make the service as experiential as possible. I'll be talking more about this service that I'm kicking around in my head with the deacons as next Halloween approaches.

All Saints Day is not so well known among Congregationalists.

Among Protestants, only the Episcopal Church seems to put a great deal of emphasis upon the day. The purpose of this holy day was to remember those who have died, whether they're officially recognized by the Church as saints or not. It's a celebration of the "communion of saints," which reminds us that the Church is not bound by time or space.

In the pre-Christian era, many were afraid of death, having nightmarish visions of the afterlife and the supernatural creatures that inhabit it. Many today probably have the same fears, though they won't admit it. Halloween, in a sense, is poking fun at these fears. When children dress up as witches, warlocks, ghosts, and goblins and all the creatures that frighten them, they're able to see them in the flesh and deal with them in a safe way. It's not really that such creatures don't exist. There are indeed monsters under the bed, even for us grownups. Halloween allows not just children, but all of us, to cope with the fears we have in life on a level that we can manage without being overwhelmed. We're able to name these monsters, dress up like them, and conquer them. At the end of the evening, the children arrive home safely with their treats and take their costumes off, symbolically sending the monsters away for another year. Those of us past childhood would do well to imitate the willingness of children on Halloween to venture forth

into the unknown with their imagination, face their fears, and triumph over them.

The veil between life and death becomes very thin at Halloween, allowing passage between the two worlds. It's not only on Halloween that we wear masks. We wear various socially acceptable masks all year round. The shameful or rejected pieces of ourselves that we try to ignore become our shadows. If we become aware of the forgiveness that Christ brings, both to ourselves and to others who have hurt us, spiritual and emotional healing may begin and we may be able to reclaim the treasures hidden in our shadows.

This is precisely the connection that Halloween has with All Saints Day with its triumphant music, prayers, and message. All Saints Day is the victorious side of Halloween. The light of All Saints Day has triumphed over the darkness of Halloween. The fright of Halloween is now transformed into the joy of All Saints Day. The saints we honor this day, a vast, incalculable crowd, are graduates of the school of struggle against evil forces that Halloween trick-or-treaters act out. The saints are those who have faced their fears and accepted God's help.

Can we bring together the two holidays of Halloween and All Saints Day? They really do go together. 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 deceased loved ones in order to get them into heaven and out of purgatory. We heard last Sunday in Bruce's sermon that the erroneous practice of selling indulgences to get loved ones out of purgatory was a major motivation for Martin Luther to launch his protest against abuses in the Roman Catholic Church. Well, trick-or-treating was a type of indulgence. Instead of offering money, the family of the deceased would offer food in exchange for prayers in behalf of their loved ones. This is also why Martin Luther chose to nail his 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church on October 31 because that would have been the time when the poor would go from door to door asking for food in exchange for their prayers for those departed from this life.

The idea of "praying for the dead" has always been rejected by Protestants. After all, what good can it do them? They're dead. They don't hear us. Nothing we can do can help them. Perhaps, though, it might be edifying if we could still include them in our prayers without praying for them. We can still bring them to God's remembrance as a way of thanking God for allowing us to spend time with them, to learn from them, to laugh with them, and to enjoy them. Our loved ones truly live

on in our memories. They live on in their influence upon us. They live on in helping to form the people that we are today. Even if we had an ambivalent relationship with those who are departed, even if we did not always get along with them, even if they hurt us in some way, keeping them in our prayers could still be a means of resolving issues we had with them. It might even change the way we remember them. It might even be a powerful opportunity for healing and closure.

We worship a God who is timeless. The closest definition of God that we find in the Bible is when God tells Moses, “I am who I am.” God is, was, and will be, not at different times, but always. God always is. God existed before time. And God will exist when time as we know it is no more. We cannot comprehend how that could be, because we’re creatures bound by time. How could there be anything or anyone before time existed? Well there was. God was there before time. God created time. God operates in time in our creation, but God created time and is beyond time. So if God is, was, and will be, and is beyond our understanding of time, God interacts with events and persons in the totality of their existence, not limited by their temporal birth and death. Our prayers then communicate with One before whom not only are we present, but also, all who have died are present. In that way, our

recalling loved ones no longer with us in prayer to God may still have a powerful effect upon us, because they're still present to God.

These past three days were very important ones in the medieval Roman Catholic Church. October 31 of course is Halloween, or All Hallows Eve, the evening before All Hallows or All Saints Day. All Saints Day is November 1, with its prayers and celebrations in honor of the saints. Then comes another almost forgotten day, for Protestants anyway, on the church calendar, All Soul's Day, November 2, when, according to the medieval Catholic Church, those who have died while still in their sins await purification and admittance into heaven.

Remembering that history, it's easy to see how this focus on death led to the ghosts and spooks and ghouls that were, and still are, associated with the dead. That's what those scary creatures prowling our streets on Thursday night were symbolizing. Halloween is a socially acceptable way to deal with our fears of death and the process of dying.

You would think that funerals would be the occasion to deal in a therapeutic way with death. And I always try to make funerals that way. But I sometimes hear comments made by those who are left behind mourning that don't really seem to deal with death's reality, especially when the person is young, comments like "God needed them more than

we did,” or “God must have loved them very much to take them so early in life.” Whenever I hear people say such things, I’m not sure that they have really processed the fact that the person has died, really died.

Though death is a natural part of the cycle of life and is inevitable, we should be angry when a person dies who is only a child, or a teenager, or only in their 20s, 30s, 40s, or 50s. Death is not always fair in the way that it happens to some. There’s a mystery to evil, and much of that mystery deals with the arbitrariness of death. Why are some allowed to live to be 100 and others have their life snuffed out at 10, 20, or 30? There’s no answer to that. The answer is certainly not that “God needed them more than we did,” or “God must have loved them very much to take them so early in life.”

Christianity is a way of life, not death. It’s a way of life that helps us to deal with death, not by denying it, but by facing it head on. In Jesus Christ, we are saved not from death, but from the power of death. We die, but death cannot take away our meaning in life. We die, but death cannot take away our enjoyment of life. We die, but death cannot take away our existence. As those redeemed by Jesus Christ, we are promised eternal life beyond death, a resurrected life beyond the grasp of hell.

We celebrate All Saints Day because those who have died in Christ

still exist, not physically, but they're still present to God. And they will exist physically once again on the day of the resurrection of the dead.

It's very interesting that the most important ritual in our faith is one about death. Of course I'm talking about Holy Communion. It's a sacrament that commemorates the death of Jesus. In it, Jesus asks us to remember. Among the things we tend to remember when we participate in Holy Communion is the faith that we've learned from those who have gone before, whether family members, friends, clergy, Sunday School teachers, or the biblical writers and great theologians of Christianity. The beliefs, practice, and legacy of those who have gone before us in the faith are what we celebrate today on this All Saints Sunday.

I invite you now as we prepare to participate in the Lord's Supper to reflect upon those who have gone before us, those who have passed away here at church, family members, friends, even those whom you've never met who have been an inspiration in your life, perhaps even those names mentioned in our Call to Worship this morning. Remember their examples and their way of living the faith. Remember the meaning they have given to your own lives. Remember what you have learned from them. And it's okay if you even want to lift their names to God in prayer, not to pray for

them, but to thank God for them and all they have meant to you in your life. Amen.