

Sermon 11-01-09

So now, here we are on All Saints Sunday, right on the button this year, November 1—changing our clocks to be here on time!

You may have a special reason for being here this Sunday, if you are remembering and honoring someone close to you by your presence and prayers this morning. You may or may not connect All Saints Sunday with Halloween—now a different sort of day, depending on what neighborhood you're in. I live on the edge of Georgetown and I still enjoy walking around the streets there on Halloween weekend and viewing really awesome decorations, even of ghosts and goblins big enough to scare the faint-hearted.

I doubt that those ghosts and goblins remind us now that All Hallows Eve was a major part of a three day church observance that goes way back in the first centuries of the Christian Church. We remember in our prayers today all those who have been part of God's work on earth throughout the ages, but in those early days when fear of the unknown had to be dealt with, it was said that ghosts indeed wandered around the earth on the eve of All Hallows day waiting to be honored, knocking on doors demanding to be satisfied with treats or face the consequences.

Nowadays, Halloween observance may depend on the fads of the times and what are the big imports on the store shelves from China; but in the early centuries of Christianity there were locations, especially in Scotland and Ireland, that were called "thin places" because it was believed that in these places the distance and the veil between heaven and earth would shrink, and the veil

would be so thin that you could actually perceive something of heaven itself.

And so people would visit those sites on the three day trinity of days October 31 to November 2, Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day, as wonderful “thin” places in the landscape of a spiritual year.

In something of that spirit of visiting the “thin” places this can be an invitation to ponder the past—not with a desire to return to it, but with a mindfulness of what it can mean for our lives today.

Now we ought to say straight up that the Feast of All Saints is not just “All Souls Day”, the day for honoring all the faithful departed. It should stand on its own as a major church celebration because it’s more than honoring the dead. It’s about celebrating what it is to be fully human—fully aware of and responsive to others. What do I mean by that? “The saint is a saint” said the theologian Paul Tillich, “not because he is good but because he or she is transparent for something that is more than he himself is.” The old Sunday School version of sainthood is on the mark: “Saints are like stained glass windows; they let the light of God shine through.”

For those of us living now in 2009, these fearful and wonderful changing times, what does all that mean?

A saint is not like what came into the mind of a teacher in an adult bible study class talking about ideas of sainthood. The teacher asked if anyone had examples of saints in their own experience. One man finally piped up “I don’t know anyone, but I’ve heard of

one—my wife’s first husband!” There was another example in a classic Peanuts cartoon strip. Lucy informs Charlie Brown, “I have examined my life and found it to be without a flaw. Therefore I’m going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal. I will then give a moving acceptance speech. After that I’ll greet myself in the receiving line.” Then, she concludes, somewhat sadly, “When you’re a saint you have to do everything yourself!”

How does that stack up with Jesus’ advice to his disciples that “the first shall be last, and the last shall be first?” Not very well. The feast of All Saints is a major Church celebration because it’s about being part of the company of the committed, the baptized people of God, the community of those who are striving to become ***fully human, striving to let the light of God shine through their lives.***

In his book “Magnificent Defeat”, Frederick Buechner writes that “If the church is not a place where we not only learned something about what it means to be human but also a place where seeds of a fuller humanity are planted in us and watered, to grow, then all our hymns and prayers and preachments are vanity.”

Buechner quotes from the stories of Graham Greene’s disappointed priest and Albert Camus’ wistful atheist, that for a life to be fully human is to “be a saint.” Because “to be a saint is to live not with the hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly that we hold it, but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to know joy... to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full.”

Buechner is quick to acknowledge that all this may be a strange and unexpected idea that this is our real business in the world, but even if the word “saint” “makes our gorges rise” it is nonetheless saints that of all things we want to become, We may settle for less—money, power, a good job, some kind of contentment—but it is that joy that we are really after, and that even as we seek it, the joy of knowing that we find it the best by not looking too hard for it.”

Now let’s shift gears some. The promise and possibility of all that is especially described by the Gospel writer John as “eternal life”--the quality of life worth eternalizing --not a matter of time but a matter of the kind of life very close to what others have described as being a saint. Jesus had earlier identified himself with God’s promise of eternal life, and now the raising of Lazerus from death is a sign of this promise for the disciples—enough to warrant Jesus being arrested later in Jerusalem.

It is only with the Church’s revision of the lectionary of the Sunday Gospel readings that for the first time we hear this story on the Feast of All Saints at St. James’ Church. Read with the other bible readings this morning, it is a very powerful one.

When we come to the end of the Gospel and Jesus cries “Lazerus come out!”-he comes out of the grave still in the shroud in which he was wrapped, Jesus word for his disciples are surprising: “**YOU** unbind him, and let him go!”

Jesus’ promise is that you and I are freed with Lazerus to share in new life! This morning on the Feast of All Saints we read this alongside the prophecy from Isaiah that the Lord God will “destroy

on the mountain the shroud that is cast over all the people, and he will swallow up death forever.” For we have in this life and the life to come the promise in the words from the book of Revelation that “behold, God will make all things new.”

So now as I think and pray about all this with you who, like me, are still on our journeys to becoming saints--to being really, fully human—I begin to understand better what the Festival of All Saints is all about: to enter God’s “thin place” between heaven and earth. For the words of scripture are “right on” for me this morning: “ here is the Lord for whom I have waited—let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!”

AMEN!