

ALL SAINTS'/ALL SOULS' DAY
A SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE, CELEBRATION, AND PRESENCE

(11/05/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 45:5-8

John 14:1-3, 15-21, 25-27

“In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (John 14:19-20)

This past Tuesday evening, at least if we have young children, young grandchildren, or live in a neighborhood where the houses are clustered close enough together to draw trick-or-treaters, we celebrated Halloween. Darlene and I handed out candy at Kristen and Mike’s house, while they went out with the kids. Miles went as Blippi, and Emerson went as Wednesday. If this doesn’t mean anything to you, you are definitely not hip, dope, fly, or *au courant* with what is happening in young people’s world today! Not to show off, but Darlene and I knew who both Blippi and Wednesday are, and why they are beloved by our grandchildren’s generation.

This fun holiday, the opportunity to act out our shadow a little in a harmless way, has a religious core and meaning. In pre-Christian Europe, especially in Great Britain, the Druids celebrated the change of the seasons on Samhain, the end of the summer. The Druids experienced God in nature. This is why we call them pagan.

I have no idea why Christians have traditionally persecuted pagans. Historical records reveal that pagans have burned very few Christians at the stake. They have subjected very few Christians to the tortures of a medieval inquisition. Jesus is the cornerstone of our faith and our understanding of God, but we need to remember that people worshipped God in one form or another long before Jesus was born.

Samhain was a time to remember loved ones who had died. It was a special time, a time set aside not only to remember relatives who had passed on to the other side, but also to feel their presence. It was like a momentary crack between the two worlds, a brief time when the door between this world and the next was open. People believed deceased relatives would come back and visit them. They left offerings of food to welcome the returning spirits and ensure that the spirits would be benevolent rather than malevolent. This is why we give candy to the little ghosts and goblins that come to our door and say, “Trick or treat!”

The date of this pagan celebration and time of remembrance of deceased relatives was later reset by the church to coincide with the Christian observance of All Souls’ Day and All Saints’ Day. Since November 1 was All Hallows’ Day, the evening of October 31 became All Hallows’ Eve or Halloween. That this date coincided with Reformation Day, the anniversary of

the date when Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg, is coincidental. It has nothing to do with the original holiday.

By the way, speaking of Martin Luther, I ran across an interesting fact the other day. Did you know that, according to a recent survey, 53% of Protestants in the United States could not identify Martin Luther as the individual who started the Reformation? 53% of *Protestants*! Our educational system, especially our Christian education system, is failing our young people—and also, sadly, our adults! I suspect these adults don't attend church on Reformation Sunday.

This morning we are going to honor the original intent of All Souls' Day and All Saints' Day by setting aside some time to remember loved ones who have died. These are people whom you not only loved; they are people you still love. You not only want to *remember* these people; you want to actually *feel their presence*. We will be opening ourselves to this experience in our Service of Remembrance, Celebration, and Presence.

As we enter into this service, I invite you to set aside words. Words can be helpful. They can reveal the truth. They can also cover and distort the truth. They stand between the truth and us as, e.g., when we connect with the words, the concepts, but not the truth behind them. This morning I would like us to move past the words to the experience.

To be sure, we do need words to communicate. Jesus used words. Actually, as recorded in the synoptic gospels, especially in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus used few words. His teaching showed in his actions, in his bearing, in his being, in his great love.

Jesus was a teacher. In order to teach us about God and life, Jesus separated or divided the world into opposites: earth and heaven; heaven and hell; those who are saved and those who are not; health and sickness; the visible and the invisible; matter and spirit; light and darkness; life and death; this side of the grave and the other side of the grave.

Dichotomization is a helpful way to talk about some things, to help us understand them, but reality is not that simple or dichotomized. Each term contains its opposite within it--and both are contained in the great unity of God. As we heard in the reading from Isaiah, God contains the opposites of light and darkness, life and death, creation and destruction, weal and woe. God contains male and female; in fact, all opposites exist within the great Unity of God.

In these moments of worship, I invite you to take down the barrier that you believe separates you from your loved ones who have died. They are not on "the other side of the grave." They are here now, within you and all around you! There is no "place" called heaven, a place that is somewhere other than where we are. The distinction between here and there,

between life and death, is a false distinction, a distinction that is a consequence of the words we use and the way we think. All is one in God! And, just perhaps, all is God.

If this is true, as I believe it is, then we are not separated from our loved ones by time or space. We are not separated from our loved ones by what we know or describe as death. Our loved ones are with us, within us--now! They are with us just as Jesus is with us and within us, though in one sense or form, a human form, Jesus lived and died 2,000 years ago.

As we heard in our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus said,

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Jesus tells his disciples (and us) that although the world will no longer see him, the disciples who love him will see him. They can never be separated from him because Jesus is in God, we are in Jesus, and Jesus is in us. Everything is contained within the great unity of God! I would simply suggest that this is also true of our loved ones who appear to have died. They are still with us!

Every communion Sunday, we remind ourselves that all we need to do is open ourselves to Jesus' presence and we will encounter him. We believe this experience is possible to those who approach the communion table in faith. When we join in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are remembering Jesus as we recall the words he said to his disciples as they sat around the table in the Upper Room. But if it is just a service of remembrance, we have missed the deeper meaning and experience of this sacrament. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are not celebrating or witnessing to a past event; we are opening ourselves to experience the presence of Christ in our prayer, in the sacrament, and in our lives.

Think of your loved ones the same way you think of Jesus. On one level you can set this time aside to remember them, to give thanks for their life, for the ways they touched your soul, for the ways you are changed because of them. But you can experience much more than this. You can experience the opening between the two worlds--because there are not two worlds! You can experience their presence with and within you in this service--and in the days and weeks to come. In these moments, you can dissolve everything that you mistakenly think separates you from your loved ones, for there is really nothing separating you from them.

Try to be still inside as we begin our Service of Remembrance, Celebration, and Presence. Set aside words and thoughts. Close your eyes. Stop your thinking and open your heart. Listen. Listen for the names of your loved ones as I read the names you have given me. Feel their presence. Listen to the names of loved ones who have been brought forth and offered up by others.

If we can feel their presence both within us and with us, in this church, in this service of worship, we will be not only celebrating All Saints' Day; we will be experiencing it.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.