

Sermon for All Saints' Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Years ago, the Bishop was here for our All Saints' Jazz & Jesus Show. Between her Harley parked out front and those syncopated fills spilling out our doors, it's a wonder Henry VIII didn't roll right out of his grave and into our pews. Afterwards, Bishop DeDe was so thrilled she asked if we did this every week. From what I understand, it's not the most professional thing in the world to laugh in your boss's face. Incredible as this service is, it's an enormous amount of work, especially for all these people making a joyful noise. Y'all are awesome, and I'm glad to have you back.

Do y'all know where All Saints' comes from? Way back in the day, the Celts celebrated Samhain midway between the Autumnal Equinox and the Winter Solstice. Samhain signaled a thinness between this world and the world of things magical. Fairies and epic heroes and long-dead spirits crossed the barrier a little easier, and the revelry of the living came with a caution of creeping dangers. In time, the Church showed up, and as it pretty much always did, it took a pagan holiday and dropped a new Christian one on top of it. That's where All Saints' comes in. If the original holiday was about otherworldly things, then we fine-tuned that focus. Where the Celts honored their dead and kept a sharp eye out for werewolves and fire-breathers, the Church kept the focus on the dead. Now the celebration would be for all the saints who'd come before, specifically those whose names we didn't know. The big ones got their own days so All Saints' Day was for those holy folks who died without recognition.

As was pretty much always the case, when the church created a holiday, people started the party a day early. The Church's holiday was All Hallows', and the people claimed the day before, All Hallows' Eve. Dressed as skeletons and ghosts and undead looking things, they'd blend in with all those spirits crossing the veil. And some put on costumes less to blend in and more to hide; if you'd done someone wrong and their spirit came back to get ya, a mask might just keep 'em at bay for another year. Soon, folks made their way to cathedrals for All Hallows' services. Those were often long treks so people tended to arrive early. But they didn't always bring everything they needed, so the folks in the cities welcomed the visitors and cooked 'em these little raisin scone things called "soul cakes." Travelers knocked on strangers' doors and sang a song of the saints of God in exchange for soul cakes to fill 'em up. Kinda like spooky caroling. As you might imagine there were some folks who didn't love the influx of out-of-towners begging at their doorstep, but they'd be ignored at their own peril. A hungry crowd denied food might remove your front gate and hide it in a nearby field. Kids sometimes lit a piece of celery on fire and stuck it in a keyhole to fill your uncooperative house with smoke. You could welcome and feed the stranger, or you could turn them away. It was up to you. What did you want: a trick or a treat?

There's a lot of other things at play, lots of lore, but them's the basics of the origin of Halloween. (Sidebar: if you've never seen the precursor to our modern pumpkin jack o'lanterns, look up the faces they used to carve into turnips. But only if you never want to sleep again.) A cool thing happened as all this grew in popularity. The people loved All Hallows' Eve (Halloween), and the Church loved All Hallows' (All Saints'), but there was a gap that didn't sit right. Halloween primed the pump for all things haintly, and All Saints' was for all things saintly, but what about my great-grandpa? He was a mean ol' dude, but he was my mean ol' dude. When was I supposed to honor folks like him? Enter All Souls' Day. It's one of the few times the Church heard the desires of the people and gave them a holiday. All Souls' landed on the other side of All Saints'. It was for remembering all the Christians who came before, regardless of how good they were when they were alive. They're your ancestors, and you needed to celebrate them. All Souls' was for just that. If you're thinking of Day

of the Dead you're spot on. It's typically celebrated on All Souls' Day, a blend of indigenous traditions with a little church sprinkled in.

So, October 31st for Halloween, November 1st for All Saints', and November 2nd for All Souls'. In time, All Saints' and All Souls' kinda got mashed together. These days, when we celebrate All Saints', we celebrate all those who've come before. We welcome their memory, and we honor what they gave for us. We recognize that one day we'll be the ones who came before, and we look for how that inevitable truth should guide us now. We also look ahead to those who'll come after us, honoring their needs with our prayers and actions. Put differently, it's love. Love looking back, love looking ahead, and love looking around us right now. Halloween clings on, of course. In place of raisiny soul cakes, I gave out Butterfingers and Nerds. And in place of only skeletons and ghosts, the disguises were skeletons and ghosts, Marvel heroes and Minions. And in place of incendiary vegetable matter crammed in front doors, there's toilet paper blowing in the trees. Most folks don't flock to cathedrals for All Saints' these days, and the church long ago gave us the choice to move All Saints' to the first Sunday after November 1st, 'cause nobody really wants to go to church on a school night.

You know, I've been thinking about this three day stretch. It's got a great name by the way, just spooky enough to complement the spookiness of a thin veil between worlds: these three days are known as the "Triduum of Death." Wild, right? Three days set aside for us to get a little spookier than normal. But the church is no stranger to spooky. Our entire claim rests on a man rising from the grave. The resurrected Christ has a body that eats and it's got scars you can touch but it moves like a specter through walls and locked doors. Even baptism, which y'all, I am so tickled to have baptisms today. Even baptisms are spooky. We lift up children and adults and the impossible promises they make. We look at them with hope and joy, and then we drown them in sacred waters and raise them to new life. We promise to show them how to live in Christ and, in time, how to die in Christ. And we long for the day we'll see them again when we all rise with Christ. Told ya it was spooky. But really, this is one of the things I love most about the church year. We've built in a time to get spooky. It's a few days where we all get to be a little goth. I'm glad we don't stay in this place year round, and I'm glad we come here together. And I'm glad it's a celebration when we do.

A few weeks ago, I talked about how Death has been around St. Thomas' too much lately. Turns out Death's been around all of Hamilton too much lately. I know very few here that haven't lost someone they knew these last two months. And if not this Fall, certainly we've all loved and lost before. One of the hardest realities of our existence is that we will lose again. Maybe another loved one, maybe an enemy, maybe ourselves. But Death is a guarantee. What I love about the Triduum of Death is the chance to come here without pretense. It's a needed reminder that one day we too will die. And it's so important we come here together. We're not tourists among The Dead, we're pilgrims here. We come with faith and trepidation and joy and worry and fear and hope and longing and love. When I spoke of Death before, I imagined him sitting in that very far seat in the corner resting his head against the back wall or sometimes sitting nearer than comfort to one of us. But All Saints' makes a different claim. It's not Death that's here, it's The Dead, along with All Those Who Are and All Those Who Will Be, joined as a single cloud of witnesses unbound by time or the steel veil that divides us. We are here with all our loves. We are here with all our losses. We are here. And so are they, and my God, that makes for a beautifully full church. Cillian, Elsie, and Chris, that's the Body you're joining today. A Body made of all you can see and a whole lot you can't.

I suppose there's one last "so what" in all this. So we're surrounded by the dead and the not-yet. Other than a great way to freak out visitors, why celebrate trick-or-treaters and the dead and all who will be? Believe it or not, the Triduum of Death is among the most Christian seasons of the entire year. At Halloween we encourage the entire world to imagine what it's like to be someone else, to step into someone else's shoes OR to welcome the stranger and feed them regardless of how scary they look. But also, it's time set aside for all of our

grief and fondness and complicated feelings around those that are gone but not forgotten. Or better yet, gone but maybe not as gone as we think. And it highlights where we sit in history. We're rather fond of ourselves and what we get up to. We need reminders that our story's part of something bigger. Now is a mighty small chunk of time when held up against everything that came before and everything that's coming after. And if now is small, we are miniscule. But all we are and all we carry can be held here, by you, by your neighbors, by ancestors who've breathed their last and progeny who've yet to fill their lungs. In the Triduum of Death, it may be spooky, but it's love we're wading in. Love looking back, love looking ahead, and love looking around now. Put differently, happy All Saints', y'all!