

Stewardship Sermon Series: Giving Thanks... "For The Communion of Saints "

Salem United Methodist Church

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; John 11:32-44; Revelation 7:9-17

November 2, 2014

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November is the month to give thanks. On this first Sunday of November, we remember and give thanks for those who have died and gone before us into God's eternal glory. After the sermon, during the Great Thanksgiving for our communion service, we will name those who have died this past year as part of the communion of saints.

This week we celebrated an ancient tradition, Halloween, with carved pumpkins and costumed trick or treaters. The word, Halloween, is an abbreviated term for "All Hallow's Eve." Its roots are found in both the pagan and Christian traditions. For the Celtic pagans, it was a harvest festival called Samhain (SAH-win) held on October, 31, which is the day in the between of the autumn equinox and winter solstice. In the eighth century, Christians began to remember those who went to be with God on the first of November and called it "All Saints Day." The eve before became a time to hold a vigil in remembrance of their loved ones. Thus, this vigil was called, "All Hallow's Eve." The word, hallow, means holy. Perhaps the church transformed this pagan holiday into a holy day of remembering. During the all night Hallow Eve's vigil, they, too, would build bonfires in the cemeteries to keep themselves warm as they remembered and prayed for the dead. For the Christians, fires represented the light of Christ in the coming of the dark winter. To pass the time during the vigil, they would sing hymns and tell the stories of the Saints in costume. The poor would go from house to house asking for food supplies in exchange for a prayer for anyone who had died in that home. People began to bake soul cakes to give to the poor on "All Hallow's Eve." The origin of doughnuts is thought to have come from these soul cakes. One baker decided to cut out a hole in the middle of the soul cake so it would become a circle, a symbol of eternity that never ends.

Autumn is a good time for Halloween because summer has ended. Winter with its darkness and cold, deathlike appearance is encroaching. Darkness brings to mind images of evil lying in the shadows waiting to emerge. Autumn makes us think about life and death. As Christians we do not need to view Halloween as a celebration of evil or the forces of darkness, but a celebration of the resurrection. Jesus triumphed over death, over evil, and offers us the hope of resurrection with the communion of saints. So we dress up, give out candy, throw parties, and have fun. We acknowledge the dark forces in our world, but we celebrate that the light of Christ overcomes the darkness. We acknowledge that death will come to us all, but we have Christ who we believe has overcome death. We can laugh at death and celebrate the new life of all those who have gone on before us are now receiving.

Autumn also reminds us of the rhythms of this world. There is a time and season for everything under heaven. Winter will come. Animals will hibernate. Plants will appear dead, but spring will come again. New life will be born. Life continues. And death will come. The cycle of life and death goes on. But we, as believers in Jesus the Christ, know that as God incarnate, God in the flesh, Jesus experienced this cycle. He celebrated life around him and he wept in times of sorrow and death. We, as believers in Jesus the Christ, also know that Jesus has the power to overcome death. He has the power to call the dead and say, "Wake up! Here is your new life, your new home with my Father and I. Welcome to eternity!"

As comforting as this thought is, none of us really know what heaven is like. Yes, there are those who have nearly died or died who have come back to share their experiences. We, also, have the vision of John the Revelator, who saw people from every part of the world worshipping the Lamb, the One sacrificed through Crucifixion, Jesus. John envisions all who have suffered and have endured persecution are redeemed. They have no more pain. They have no more hunger or thirst. Their needs are met. And God personally wipes away all tears of sorrow. This vision is our hope realized. John envisions heaven to be a place of transformation. We will be the same, yet changed. We will be made whole. All that is broken or damaged about us will be made new. John Wesley called this our glorification. We will be reunited with each other, and yes, I think, we just may be surprised who will be there. And we will worship like we have never worshipped God before. We will be singing praises to God like we have never done before. The music will be out of this world. It will be heavenly! Wow! Heaven is our hope.

The idea of heaven gives us comfort, too, when we think of our loved ones who have died, and as we face our own mortality. All of us will die. Our life and our death are part of the rhythm. This November is a special time for me. It marks a five year anniversary of my last cancer treatment. In cancer terms, five years of being cancer free is something to celebrate. When I received the message, "You have cancer," I faced my mortality. I could die from this disease. Many do. Some on our All Saints list today have. Of course, I wanted to live. My daughter was in her third trimester of her second pregnancy. I wanted to see my grandchildren grow up. The baby she was carrying is now a talented and self-assured five year old. Yes, I wanted to fight this disease with everything we could throw at it. And we did. As I was going through my treatment though, I realized that I was not in a win-lose situation. I was not in a situation in which I could either win or lose the battle of cancer. I saw myself in a win-win situation. If the treatment worked, I won the battle of cancer and had more time. If the treatment didn't work, if the cancer reoccurred, I still won. I would win the ultimate race and receive my heavenly reward. Both are something to celebrate.

So today we come to celebrate those who have already won this race. They have joined the ranks of the communion of saints. This phrase pops up at the end of the Apostles' Creed. "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." These last five phrases seem to be connected. The universal church will come together around the Throne of the Lamb. They will become the communion of saints. The word, communion, comes from the Latin, *communis*, which means holding something in common or coming together. We often call partaking of the Lord's Table as communion because we are coming together as a Christian community, another word that comes from *communis*. As a community, we come together with God or, more accurately, God comes to us and we commune together. So the communion of saints is made up of those who have died as forgiven sinners, who have experienced the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. As we pray the Great Thanksgiving today, we will ask God to renew our communion with those we love and have gone on to win their prize. This is one of the beautiful, mystical components of communion. At the Lord's Table, we commune together as the church. We commune together with Jesus as the Crucified and Risen Christ. And the saints in heaven commune with us on earth.

So Halloween can be a reminder to us that death is not the end and that darkness does not prevail. Jesus has overcome it. These candles we light today in memory of our loved ones are a witness of both.

Resources: "All Hallow's Eve" by Mary Reed Newland, <http://www.catholiceducation.org>.

