

All Saints Sunday 2019 Sermon

November 3, 2019

From time immemorial, we human beings have sought to remember people who lived exemplary lives, or who accomplished great things or made great sacrifices. Heroines and heroes are memorialized in story and poetry, statuary and song. It is no different in the Christian Church: we remember Saints who have lived exemplary lives or accomplished great things or were martyred for their faith, honoring them with their own day on our Church Calendar – usually the day they died and were born into heaven. In the *early* Church, before Christianity became the accepted religion of the Roman Empire, Christians were often persecuted and even martyred for their faith. There were too many of these martyrs for each one to have a special day on the Church Calendar, so a tradition arose that one day each year be set aside to celebrate all the saints who may not be recognized with their *own* day on the Church Calendar. By the late Fourth Century, All Saints' Day – also called "All Hallows' Day," began to be celebrated in many places on Nov. 1.

In the 11th Century, the day **following** All Saints' Day came to be celebrated as "All Souls' Day," or as it is now known in many traditions, "The Commemoration of the Faithful Departed." Originally, this was a day to pray for those whose *souls* were in Purgatory, not yet in heaven as the "saints" were. In many Protestant traditions, however, where purgatory is not a part of our theology, All Souls' Day has become conflated with All Saints' Day, and we remember **all** the departed on November 1 (or the Sunday following). After all, St. Paul in his letters used the word "saints" to refer to **all** followers of Christ.

Now, there is something spiritual about **this** time of year that has been perceived and recognized by many different cultures of people down through the centuries. In the ancient Celtic traditions, the feast of Samhain (pronounced *sow-in*), celebrated from sunset on October 31 to sunset on November 1, marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of the "darker half" of the year. (We mark this "darker" time by changing our clocks in an attempt to "save" daylight.) Nov. 1 is roughly halfway between the autumnal equinox and the winter solstice (Wikipedia), which gave it significance in the cycle of nature to which ancient peoples were so physically *and* spiritually tied. The Celts called this a "thin time", one of those times of the year when the veil between this world and the next was considered most "thin" and the threshold between worlds most easily traversed. A closeness to those who had died was felt strongly at this "thin" time. For some folk, this closeness was experienced as comforting; for others who *feared* the spirits of the dead, the day was frightening, and a tradition arose that people would wear masks and disguise themselves on All Hallows' Eve (Halloween) so that these dead spirits wouldn't recognize them.

Episcopal monk Curtis Almquist describes how **his** experience with this holiday has changed over his lifetime. He writes:

“My first experience of the faithful departed was not a positive one. I was a young child, and it dawned on me that ‘they’ could see me. **Everyone** in heaven could see me. It was like when *I* looked down into my terrarium. It was like an Alfred Hitchcock movie with a one-way mirror. It was like the x-ray eyeglasses that you could buy through the mail. I was being watched all the time, and I was terrorized at the prospect of being seen so deeply and, perhaps, by so many in the heavens. Yikes.”¹

But Brother Almquist no longer sees this time as frightening or negative.

“I’ve quite changed my mind about the faithful departed,” he writes. “I still imagine that I am seen (that we are seen), and heard and remembered by the faithful departed – whether it’s like a terrarium or a hidden microphone or whatever, I don’t know... But the **reason** I’ve changed my mind has much more to do with the nature of love. Love is not blind. Love is seeing and hearing and knowing someone deeply. Not *despite* who they are but *in light of* who they are, truly and wholly. And so to be, in some way, **remembered** by those who walked the path of this life – a path that overlaps in some way with our own – and who *knew* us in this life, whom we believe know us **now** – may be a source of enormous comfort. Someone taking the long view and loving view of us from some larger perspective, and then whispering in Jesus’ ears about us. And so there’s another image that comes from my own childhood, and a very positive image: of parents or grandparents or teachers sitting in grandstands during a sports event whispering to one another, with great pride and affection, about the kids running around the playing field... or children who are performing on stage before adoring adults. It’s not that the [*excellence* of the] children’s sport or their art **evokes** so much love and whispered admiration among the adults. It’s simply that the adults can see in these beloved children *from where* these efforts have come and where they will lead as the child grows... and these adults can do nothing but [beam with joy].

“How wonderful it is to be remembered, and especially remembered by those who know us and understand us, and who hold us in their heart, whether these people actually be alive on this earth or whether they have died and are, in some way, still “alive in Jesus Christ” [as are all the loved ones pictured around us in this church today]. Somehow their remembrance of us bridges the gap between this life and the next, helping in some way pave the way for us into eternity where we will be welcomed and reunited with those... who have died before us...”²

Curtis Almquist speaks of the **dead** remembering and loving *us*. Our loved ones who are pictured around us – indeed, standing around us – here today still know and love us deeply. But the opposite, of course, is also true: we who remain on this earth still know and love deeply those who have gone before us. One of Brother Almquist’s fellow monks writes: “how can we stop loving someone, stop

holding them in our hearts before God, simply because they have passed from this life.

“Death cannot kill the love that binds us together in a bond which transcends time and space.

“For it is ultimately the unbreakable bond of love which lifts us above both time and space, into the very life of God himself.”³

I mentioned earlier that these three days are a “thin time” when the veil between this world and the next is very thin indeed. In the Easter Triduum of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Day we face death in its fiercest form, Jesus’ death **and** our death; and we are raised from death to life with him. Likewise, in the *Autumn* Triduum of All Hallows’ Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls’ Day (sometimes called “a little Easter”), we also face squarely the reality of death (in displaying ghosts and skeletons and graveyards on our lawns), and we participate in Christ’s victory over death, which binds all who have ever lived or will live into one communion of Saints.

My friends, we are not alone. The saints pictured all around us are still with us as “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven” we worship God in Christ today. For you see, in reality, every time we celebrate Eucharist, it is a ‘thin time’. As we re-enact in this sacrament the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s power to bring life from death is made manifest once again. “The present is once more shot through with the timeless, and we are brought through love, into the very presence of God **and** into the presence of those we love, the communion of saints and the whole company of heaven.”⁴

AMEN

1 from a sermon posted All Souls Day, November 2, 2005,
<http://ssje.org/ssje/2005/11/>

2 *ibid.*

3 Br. Geoffrey Tristram, <http://ssje.org/ssje/2003/11/04/all-souls-day-2/>

4 Tristram, *ibid*