

November 4, 2018 *Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34*

Where's your saint costume?

A priest told the little kids in his church that they could come Trick-or-Treating at the rectory, but they should dress up as one of the Saints. So the kids arrive - here's a little boy dressed up as St. Anthony, another as St. Joseph, a little girl is St. Clare - and then there's this kid in a dog costume. So Father asks "Where's your saint costume?" The little boy replies: "I'm SAINT BERNARD!"

The old time pastor was galloping down the road, rushing to get to church on time. Suddenly his horse stumbled and pitched him to the ground. In the dirt with a broken leg, the pastor called out, "All you saints in Heaven, help me get up on my horse!" Then, with superhuman effort, he leaped onto the horse's back and fell off the other side. Once again on the ground, he called to Heaven, "All right saints, just half of you this time!"

This morning we are celebrating All Saints Day. Instead of using the lectionary prescribed for All Saints, I decided to leave in the lessons appointed for the Sunday closest to November 2nd, or Proper 26 as it's known in church lingo, to see where they might lead us. I thought our Psalm this morning was particularly beautiful, with a glimpse of how the kingdom of heaven should be lived out in the here and now by following God's example... [Read from bulletin] Surely the saints we celebrate this morning knew this in their hearts and with faith, and by the grace of God, persevered in doing just such good works in our broken world.

This past Wednesday was Halloween. Everybody knows about it. We dress up in costumes, carve pumpkins in exotic caricatures, and go trick or treating. But what do we know about its roots? The actual spelling for the day is Hallowe'en with an apostrophe between the e's - since it's a contraction of All Hallows' Evening, or All Hallows' Eve.

So, what does this word "Hallow" mean? According to Wikipedia, as a verb, to hallow is "to make holy or sacred, to sanctify or consecrate, to venerate". The adjective form hallowed, which we all use with some regularity (in The Lord's Prayer), means holy, consecrated, sacred, or revered. And in the noun form "hallow", as used in Halloween, is a synonym of the word saint. Thus, All Hallows Evening is the day preceding All Saints' Day, which is always celebrated on November 1st.

In the early days of the church, Christians had to meet secretly and developed traditions of honoring the anniversary of local martyrs' deaths. However, during the terrible days of persecution under such emperors as Nero and Diocletian, the number of martyrs became so great that a separate day could not be assigned to each. So, one day was established to remember them all. On the first recorded All Saints' Day, St. Basil of Caesarea in 397 A.D. invited all the Christians of the province of Pontus for a feast honoring the fallen.

Since those times, the faithful have gathered to give thanks for the life and ministry of the saints – women and men whose witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ has been a blessing in every generation. Many of their writings have become popular, their deeds inspire us to name hospitals and schools and churches for them, and their service to the Church is taught to the faithful in every generation. Their lives and ministries have richly blessed the church.

Of course, by worldly standards, it would appear that the saints didn't know very much about blessings. Most of them didn't know the first thing about wealth, and many lived all or part of their lives in poverty. To which many non-believers and believers alike, might ask, "who would want to be anything like those gloomy, morose, unsmiling saints that we see portrayed in Christian art?"

But here's a surprise: even the briefest glance at their biographies reveals joyful and energetic men and women who liked to have a laugh.

As I was looking into saintly humor I found many examples of light-hearted saints; for instance St. Augustine of Hippo, praying, "Lord, give me chastity ... but not yet."; or St. Philip Neri, a 16th-century Italian priest, who when asked what prayer would be the most appropriate to say for a couple after a wedding Mass, responded, "A prayer for peace."

I also learned that Pope John XXIII, who served as pope from 1958 to 1963 and was canonized in 2014, was quite the cut-up. One of his famous lines came when a journalist asked him, "Your Holiness, how many people work in the Vatican?" John paused, thought it over, and said, "About half of them."

Someone once asked John about the Italian habit of closing offices in the afternoon. "Your Holiness, we understand that the Vatican is closed in the afternoon, and people don't work then." "Ah no!" said the pope. "The offices are closed in the afternoon. People don't work in the morning!"

In the 1940s, when John was still an archbishop and serving as the papal nuncio, or ambassador, in Paris, he was at an elegant dinner party, seated across from a woman wearing a low-cut dress that exposed a good deal of cleavage. Someone turned to him and said, "Your Eminence, what a scandal! Aren't you embarrassed that everyone is looking at that woman?" "Oh no," John said, "everyone is looking at me, to see if I'm looking at her."

Who couldn't love a pope who had a sense of humor? Much of his humor seemed to flow naturally from his joy. His joy made him comfortable enough to laugh at himself, to poke fun at his office, and invited others into his humorous outlook on the world.

There is something irresistible about a person in a position of authority with a self-deprecatory sense of humor. It instantly binds you to the person. Perhaps because we see in them a reflection of what we could be, of what God wants us to be even in the midst of our accomplishments: simple, humble, aware of our own limitations and, of course, joyful.

Not only do we honor the famous saints today, but we use the day, as well, to honor and remember those “saintly” friends and family who have *personally* touched our lives and helped set us and keep us on our paths of Christian service and devotion. We remember them with love and joy and pray that they, and all the saints, may be a daily example for how we should live our lives.

“Coco” dealt with the significance of family in a beautiful way. As did our reading from Ruth... Did you watch “Coco”? How did it speak to you?

While the portrayal of the afterlife in “Coco” is not really theologically how we would think of heaven... shown as a world much like the living world (except with funny skeletons!) where good is not necessarily rewarded (i.e. Hector) and evil is not necessarily brought low (i.e. De La Cruz), it dealt with the importance of family, both past and present, in our formation as humans, and the influence of other souls, both in positive and negative ways, on our lives.

Miguel needed to find a fuller understanding of why his family hated music so, when he knew in his soul that it was something that was a part of him, a pillar of his very being. It was a sort of vision quest that he needed... a journey into realms unknown in order to attain a deeper awareness. Something we can do in prayer and meditation. And in joyful song... not just singing the words, but feeling them reach into our core... words written by believers that went before us, written in faith and hope and love.

So today, as we celebrate the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of All Souls, let us begin to live by a different set of standards. Instead of worldly standards, let us begin to live by the standards of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is even now and to be.

Our commitment starts anew today. It starts by taking joy in loving our enemies. It starts by taking joy in showing kindness to people who don’t deserve it. It manifests itself in the ability to listen and show honor to those who are forced to beg. This joy is lived out, not in the comfort of our homes or our churches or our offices, but among the poor and the hungry and the sorrowful and the hated; because, after all, the Kingdom of God belongs to them.

We can do this! We have the life and teachings of Jesus to give us strength. As he said to Mary and Martha after raising Lazarus from the dead, and as he says to us, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” We are Christ’s hands and feet, his heart and love in this broken world.

Jesus tells us this morning to “‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ And further, to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

These words are trustworthy and true. If we strive to do this, following the example of the saints, and live our lives in faith – when we exchange our worldly standards for Kingdom standards, He tells us, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

And the blessed communion of saints cries out with joy, “Alleluia! Alleluia!” ~ ~ ~

For All Saints and All Souls prayers
please add names to this list

Jimmy Tapscott

Thomas McCarty

Mattie McCarty

Antonio Pitta

Rosa Pitta

Tommy McCarty

Maxine Underwood

Tom Carter

Sheila Lloyd Diaz

Nancy Elizabeth Hall

Warren Daniel Hall, Sr.

Sannie Bassett Hall

Carter Lee Refo

Elizabeth Nelson Tompkins

Gregory Allen McKain

Louise McClaughry