

**“SAINTS, SOULS, AND HEROES OF FAITH,” delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2022**

Tomorrow night is Halloween—an occasion that looms large in the imagination of children and, more than ever, adults. In terms of sheer decoration and festive merry-making Halloween holiday-making is now second only to Christmas. Just look around in some of our neighborhoods. Front lawns have become full graveyards, saturated with witches and skeletons as well. It’s all intended as innocent fun. Yet is there a darker side to this dark side? Some certainly think there is. More than a handful of Christian churches ask their members to stay clear of it all, fearful that all such Halloween extravagance might make participants susceptible to genuine Satanic temptation.

Personally, I don’t believe in raising the devil unless you can slay him. Yet I believe that most folks can distinguish between what is fun and what is truly evil, devilish and demonic, separating them out from each other. At the same time, should we ever witness a genuine tipping point where there is some recognizable correlation between Halloween holiday-making and diabolical deeds, then I would be amongst the first to say that something needs to change—now.

Ironically, Halloween first emerged as a part of a Christian campaign to tame paganism. Many of the ideas and images today associated with Halloween were inherited in a filtered way from pre-Christian Celtic observances.

In pre-Christian Ireland and other Celtic realms, summer’s end was celebrated on October 31 as a holiday known as Samhain (*pronounced “Sow-en”*). Also, the next day was observed as the start of a new year. Celtic legend held that on summer’s last night all the laws of space and time were suspended, enabling the spirit world of the dead to comingle with the realm of the living. That was not necessarily a happy prospect. Disembodied spirits, it was believed, eagerly sought living human bodies to seize, possess, and torment for the full year ahead.

In order to protect themselves against such wild spirits, Celtic men and women of Ireland and Scotland sought to appease them or drive them completely away. To this end, sacrifices were made to Celtic deities. Bonfires were also commonly lit. In fact, the sacrifices made and treating done survive as the basis for today’s popular custom of passing out treats to costumed Halloween visitors.

As it turned out, Celtic notions regarding such spiritual mischief at summer’s end readily spread across Europe at the same time that Christianity was very differently introducing

itself to nation after nation. Ultimately, Christianity found it necessary to meet Celtic paganism and its beliefs head on. However, rather than try to suppress paganism completely and squelch all Celtic Samhain practices, which might have alienated the very men and women that our missionaries wanted to bring to Christ, the expanding Christian church found it wiser to Christianize the two-day Celtic festival. Consequently, in the eighth century, Pope Gregory III of the Roman Church designated November 1st as 'All Saints Day' or 'All Hallows Day,' commemorating Christian apostles, saints, and martyrs. This was to be followed up on November 2<sup>nd</sup> with yet another observance to be called 'All Souls Day.' Specifically, it was presented as an occasion to offer ardent prayers for those less-than-saintly deceased who, because of their earlier earthly sins, needed a spiritual boost in order to make a final ascent from an intermediary realm of Purgatory, where their sins were being purged, into heaven.

Of course, in a throwback to Jewish custom, these two back-to-back holy days were to commence at sundown on the evening before the dawn of All Saints or All Hallows Day. That evening came to be known as All Saints Eve or All Hallows Eve. Thereafter, a little bit of reductionistic tweaking transformed All Hallows Eve, incorporating the word *hallow* or *holy*, thus meaning Hallowed or Holy Evening, into our more familiar Halloween.

All Saints Eve (aka All Hallows Eve), All Saints Day (aka All Hallow Day), and All Souls Day were prominent and popular fixtures of the church calendar for century upon century. They still remain so in the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church and a close-to-Catholic Episcopal Church. It was only with the rise of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s that a wider Christian observance of All Hallows Eve, All Hallows Day, and All Souls Day began to dim and shrink.

It is no mere coincidence or accident that Reformation Sunday, which stands as the birthday of the Protestant movement, coincides with these more traditional Christian holy days. The great Protestant leader, Martin Luther, at that time still a Roman Catholic monk, specifically chose the occasion of these church holidays to hammer his complaints to the church to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. All the pious people filing into church for the days' special masses were most likely to notice them.

Moreover, at the heart of Luther's objection to then-prevailing church practices was his whole critique of the saint-system being celebrated on All Saints Day. Up until that point, Christians in their daily needs were encouraged to pray to one saint or another to intervene on their behalf with Christ and God. For purposes of such prayer every Catholic Church came equipped with shrines altars dedicated to the various saints, beginning with

Mary, mother of Jesus. Luther was so bold as to challenge all this. Why not pray directly to Christ and God? he simply asked.

Additionally, Luther came to doubt the church's whole idea of purgatory, underscored by All Souls Day, where deceased sinners were imagined to reside as captives for endless years until their penance had fully run, fulfilled in God's sight. After all, Luther observed, nowhere is purgatory mentioned in the Bible, which was the ultimate authority for him. Moreover, through personal experience, Luther was very differently persuaded of the greatness and power of God's grace and forgiveness. Even the most notorious sinner could, he contended, be saved for heaven if he or she before death sincerely confessed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, seeking divine forgiveness for wrongs done to God and fellow men and women. On the other hand, upon death, without such heart-felt confession and repentance, the gates of heaven were in Luther's estimation surely closed to the sinner forever. As Luther thereafter taught, not all the prayers in the world could change that fact after someone died. There was no way to buy anyone's entrance into heaven either. According to Luther, the church itself was sinning against God if it preached or taught otherwise in these matters.

Significantly, Luther still appreciated those whom the church had previously canonized as saints. In his view, saintly human beings are always worthy of remembrance whatever our particular theological views might be. He personally regarded the saints as heroes of faith, albeit very human. Indeed, if Luther had had his way and held sway, the sculpted statues adorning church sanctuaries which depicted the saints would not have been removed and destroyed as they so commonly were by so-called radical Protestant iconoclasts repudiating Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, the Protestant theology which Luther forged, soon ratified by others, did in a metaphorical sense knock all the saints from their once exalted pedestals. First of all, the saints in Luther's fresh conception were no closer to God than the rest of us mortals. Secondly, they held no special intercessory powers which could make their prayers any better or more effective than our own. Consequently, it was up to us all as individual Christian men and women to work out our problems with Christ and God directly.

In the end, Luther's cancellation of both the cult of the saints and an imagined purgatory rendered both All Saints Day and All Souls Day rather superfluous. In their place arose the Protestant custom of Totenfest or Memorial Sunday, where we remember the dead on the first Sunday of November—as we will do here next week. Likewise, All Saints Eve or All Hallows Eve lost significance too. As we all know, it has certainly survived. But as a Halloween shorn of religiousness--a secular holiday only.

Unweighted by anything Christian, it has become a night of spooky levity, complete with witches, ghosts, ghouls, and goblins. It has also been commercially exploited to the hilt.

Frankly, a part of me does wish that All Saints Day and All Souls Day hadn't faded from Protestantism so completely and entirely because of our evolving theologies. Of course, there's nothing wrong with a little fun and frivolity on the cusp of November as we prepare for winter's advance. I know that I enjoyed Halloween and trick n' treating as a kid, variously parading in award-winning costumes as a mummy and totem pole. Weather permitting, our children and grandchildren are going to enjoy themselves as we host 'Trunk and Treat' on our church's circular drive where everyone can be safe and afterwards enjoy a hayride and photos in a giant pumpkin carriage. Yet, as even Martin Luther believed, it is important for us to seriously remember and celebrate saintly lives devoted to God's Word and the values, virtues, and high ideals that the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims. Indeed, in our present time when self-serving opportunists show up all over the place, as numerous as the ghosts and ghouls of Halloween, we could all benefit by turning an eye to those not so selfish.

Over the long history of our Christian faith there have been many heroes and heroines who, true to Jesus and uncorruptible in their morals, continue worthy of our emulation. They have honored the son as they have honored the father as are all called to do. (*John 5:20*) Some of them may be famous. Others may well have led much less conspicuous, more ordinary and humble lives. All the same they stood, as best they could, committed to what is "true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and honorable." (*Philippians 4:8*) We all need to look for them and look to them that we might, in turn, be inspired and become more aspirational, striving like them to be more loving and righteous people in spite of the moral dumbing down that clouds the thinking and actions of too many today. That's something to take deeply to heart as we celebrate this Reformation Sunday and also next week's Totenfest which in the life of our church essentially stands in place of older observances of All Saints Day and All Souls Day.

In closing might I add this? As we observe our kids' delight with Halloween trunk and treating. let us as grown-ups always keep in mind that as bright and clever as some folks in this life imagine themselves to be, no one can trick God. And there is no treat in the end for those who don't honor God's holy and righteous purposes revealed through the unselfish life of Jesus Christ and all who since his crucifixion and resurrection have faithfully followed in his name. **Amen.**