

Ruth 1:1-18

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:11-14

Mark 12:28-34

It's hard to imagine that any of you haven't noticed that today is Halloween. Tonight we will be greeting ghosts and goblins at our front door and offering them candy as they say to us "Trick or Treat!" It seems a remarkable coincidence that this particular holiday falls on a Sunday that the lectionary has filled with scripture passages that extol the virtues of love. We will get back to the odd significance of that in just a moment. We don't necessarily associate Halloween with love. Quite the opposite. We associate Halloween with pranks and scary scenes in cemeteries and other scary references to death and the occult.

It's easy for us to wonder why a Christian would celebrate Halloween which tends to be the glorification of the occult and the superstitions surrounding death and ghosts and evil spirits, but many Christians do. It's easy for us to dismiss all the references to the occult as just so much nonsense, but as Christians, we shouldn't be too quick to ignore them. Like many pagan festivals established before the church, Halloween began with the druids in Britain and France. It was an observation of the end of summer when they made sacrifices to the gods. It was the beginning of the Celtic year and they believed that Samhein, the lord of death, sent evils spirits to attack humans who could escape only by assuming disguises and looking like evil spirits themselves. Most of our Halloween practices can be traced back to those old pagan rites and superstitions.¹

The church, as it became established, invited the people to celebrate their pagan festivals differently and to give them different meanings. In the seventh and eighth centuries, Christians celebrated 'All Saints Day', a festival for all the saints established by the eastern church in the fourth century. Originally, All Saints Day was celebrated in May, but eventually it was moved to November 1 and was called All Hallows Day. It became the custom, then, for the evening before to be called "All Hallow E.en." Other pagan festivals eventually became merged with Christian celebrations like Easter and Christmas. We wouldn't have the Easter Bunny or colored eggs or Christmas trees if it hadn't been for the merger of these Christian and pagan celebrations. The dilemma for the Christians always was...and perhaps still is: "Do we ignore a pagan romp, merge with it, attack it, or cover it up with seasonal fun?"²

The success of Christianizing the pagan calendar can be debated, but when the neighbors are fearfully sacrificing to a lord of death and dodging witches' tricks, it would seem an appropriate time to celebrate the Lord of life and the resurrection. Merging the pagan festivals and the Christian celebrations was an opportunity to evangelize and give others an alternative way to explain the phenomena of life. It was actually a brilliant strategy. The idea of All Saints' Day is the precise opposite of chains, moaning ghosts, and evil spirits. It provides an opportunity for us to remember each of our loved ones who have served Christ and are now in heaven. In remembering those precious loved ones now departed our songs are ones of triumphant joy, hosannas, and eventual reunion. It is all the reverse of the dead becoming ghosts who roam cemeteries in agonizing quests or the spiritual powers taunting and torturing humans. Our Christian response is one of loving celebration.³

We can celebrate Halloween in decidedly Christian fashion in our worship and in our prayers. We can celebrate the lives of saints from the past and we can celebrate the life of the blessed ones we still love who are in paradise. This is the opportunity to celebrate Christ's power over death and the joys of heaven that he related to his followers. However, we must never be superficial about evil. We all know it exists. It impinges on our world and interrupts our lives. Jesus, who was a man of sorrows and well-acquainted with grief, was never naïve about evil. Our celebrations of victory in Christ are always set against a dark background of the overwhelming evil that made the cross necessary in the first place. Halloween is a time for thoughtful evangelism.⁴ In his book *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper and Row, 1978) Richard Foster says, "Why allow Halloween to be a pagan holiday in commemoration of the powers of darkness? Fill the house or the church with light; sing and celebrate the victory of Christ over darkness!"

The pages of the Bible are full of the descriptions of Christ's victory over darkness. Each passage describing that victory is filled with love...a kind of love that each of us longs for, but very few of us fully experience in this life. Our prayer is the acknowledgement that because of Christ's gift to his faithful people, we can run without stumbling to obtain Christ's heavenly promises. That gift that Christ gave to his faithful people is life eternal...the greatest gift of all.

It seems appropriate, then, that our scripture passages should extol the virtues of love...human love and divine love. We all know that the veil is very thin that separates us from those we love who are now in eternal light. And we know that when we celebrate the Holy Eucharist we are communing not only with the ones standing next to us around the altar, but with all those who are tethered to us by love and are now on the other side of the veil.

Descriptions of love are woven all through Biblical passages. In our first reading this morning, from the Book of Ruth, we hear the story of the extraordinary love of a young woman for her mother-in-law in the midst of circumstances that were treacherous for both of them. They had left Israel because there was no food there and they settled in Moab. While they were there, Naomi's husband died. Her two sons married Moabite women and then her sons died as well. Naomi was a widow in a foreign and hostile country. She is without male protection and without male provisions. She can't take care of herself or her daughters-in-law. When she hears that there may be food in Judah, she starts her return to Israel, but she tells her two daughters-in-law to remain in their own country of Moab. She can't provide for them...in Moab or in Israel. She is all alone...defenseless and without resources. One of her daughters-in-law goes back to her people as she was told. She stays in Moab. But the other one...Ruth...refuses to leave Naomi alone. Her love for Naomi is so strong that she can't bear to be separated from her no matter what happens. She knows that in all likelihood she and Naomi will both die, but her love for Naomi is insistent. She will go wherever Naomi goes. Naomi's people will be her people. She will stay with Naomi wherever Naomi is. This is a story of love beyond all comparison. Only death will part them. We aren't given the remainder of this passage this morning, but as the story of Ruth unfolds, we discover that Ruth becomes one of the ancestors who provides the way for Jesus to enter into this world. Ruth's undying love for Naomi puts her in the right place at the right time and in the right circumstances to be part of the miracle of the incarnation. Love paved the way for Jesus long before he entered this world.

In Psalm 146 we hear about the loving ways of God from the psalmist. God keeps his promise. The God of Jacob helps those who hope in God and rely on God. God gives justice to those who are oppressed and don't receive justice. God feeds the ones who are hungry...with all different kinds of hunger as only God can. God restores those who have been imprisoned and sets them free. God opens the eyes of the blind. God lifts up those who are beaten down and discouraged. God loves those who are in a right relationship with Him...the righteous. And God cares for the stranger. God sustains the widow and the orphan for they are without resources. But God frustrates those who are wicked. All of these descriptions of God and what God does and will do are expressions of love in action. Each one of these acts sets another person free in some respect. God shows us in all the different ways how he loves his children...and that's us!!

When St. Paul writes his letter to the Hebrews, he is describing for them the ultimate act of love that Jesus gave to all human beings. He described Jesus' gift in terms that the Hebrews could understand...in terms that were meaningful to them. Jesus entered a holy place not made with human hands. It was a perfect place that God had created. He entered one time and he entered for all. His sacrifice was not one made by animals' blood. His sacrifice was made with his own blood. His blood doesn't just sanctify and cleanse as the blood of animal sacrifices might. Jesus'

blood purifies our conscience from dead works so that we might worship the living God. Love beyond measure. Jesus' own lifeblood poured out to make us clean.

And Mark tells us about a conversation between Jesus and one of the scribes who wants to know which commandment is the first of all. Jesus replies with the Shema (from Deuteronomy 6:4-9) It is the Jewish profession of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart." The scribe affirms what Jesus has said and adds to it. He tells Jesus, "This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus seems pleased with the scribes understanding of the meaning and value of the Shema and he says to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

How many of us long to hear those reassuring words from Jesus, "You've got it! You understand! You can see what I mean!" Such a confirmation is so loving and affirming. We long for that kind of statement for ourselves. What a measure of love reassurance can be.

There are many different ways to love...to love God, to love our family, to love our friends, to love others in general. And this is the whole point of what Jesus wants us to know and how Jesus wants us to behave. How often do we wonder if what we are doing...or not doing...is pleasing to God? How often do you examine your own thoughts and actions? Are we aware of how often our meager words and actions can wound or heal another depending on the circumstances? God in Jesus has shown us so many ways to love from gentle correction to reassurance to rebuke (when necessary). God wants our love and devotion in the same measure God has given to us.

Without God's help we are not able to do that. But if we ask for God's help, it will be given to us and we will be able.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

¹⁻⁴ Myra, Harold L., CT Classic: Is Halloween a Witches' Brew? OR have Christians been spooked out of celebrating a part of their rich tradition?
http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=16044