



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON - ALL SAINTS DAY

REVELATION 7:9-17

NOVEMBER 1, 2020

“THOSE ARE NO COSTUMES – THOSE ARE SAINTS”

In the early 5th century, Pope Boniface 1 attempted to reign in some of the practices of non-Christian peoples regarding death. Of particular concern to Boniface was a ritual of the Celtic people of England and Ireland known as Samhain. Samhain was observed over three days starting October 31, when it was believed the barriers between the physical and spirit world were broken down. During Samhain the living hosted the dead with bonfires, meals, donning costumes of animals to trick hostile visitors like fairies that accompanied ancestors, and the carving of turnips with faces and lumps of coal placed in them known as “jack o lanterns.”

Boniface thought this was getting out of hand, so he tried creating a day to remember and honor Christian martyrs – placing it on May 13th. But that did little to stop the fall fire festivals, so a 9th century pope named Gregory moved the celebration of the Martyrs back to the time of those festivals, appointing November 1 as “All Saints Day”, with October 31 known as “All Hallows Eve” – Halloween! It’s no surprise that death has captured human attention and imagination from time immemorial.

Ecclesiastes 9:4 gives a decidedly “Old Testament” view of death – saying “*anyone who is among the living has hope – even a live dog is better than a dead lion.*” Well. It doesn’t get much rosier in verse 5 which says, “*for the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten.*” Gotta hand it to the pagans of ancient Europe – they begged to differ. They remembered their dead every year.

And that is what the popes who created All Saints Day were doing too...remembering the dead - but in an altogether different way. If there is any good about the church mimicking pagan festivals, infusing them with Christian symbolism and meaning – Christmas being the other prominent example – wherein a Roman sun god festival celebrated every December 21st became the opportunity for the church to tell the story of the birth of the ‘*Light of the World*’ – it is that we have a story to tell about death too, and so very much at odds with the stories the world tells.

Yet, despite our having an “All Saints Day” for nearly 1200 years, our culture has, until about 50 years or so ago, tried to keep death a secret. Instead of saying death we would and often still use phrases like “*passing away...losing a loved one*”, or as the editor of the Boyd County Herald in my first call in Nebraska would say in all his paid death notices – ‘*so and so*’ “*succumbed!*” Life insurance brochures – and what in the world do we buy life insurance for in the first place – would nonetheless hardly mention the word “death” – using instead phrases like “*if anything should happen to you.*” Yeah...like what? I read of a pastor in Boston who was asked **not** to use the 23rd Psalm *at a funeral* because it contained that word...“death”! The family evidently thought that a celebration of life service for a loved one was no time to bring that up.

Even through our guarded words, “*the living know that they will die.*” But what the Christian knows is that the dead in Christ live. Not to roam about looking for a meal – not knocking on doors looking for some company – they live together and full and free in the presence of Jesus. So especially today, we take special note of the altar. We mostly think of it as the place where we “receive

communion” and meet our Savior. We go for the forgiveness of our sins. But recall the words of the liturgy today dear people...*“therefore with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven.”* You see, our story says we dine with the dead every week – and if anything, they host us. We come to the altar to meet the saint or saints of our family.

You may go the grave and have your little talks with them, that is fine, but you come here to dine with them. Ol’ Boniface was on to something...the church has another story to tell about death. And the Saints of God know it’s no trick. That does not mean that we should trifle with death or “succumb” (I just had to use that word again) to the therapeutic thinking of those who have coined phrases like “a good death.” Christians know that death is our enemy. Romans 6:23 says *“the wages of sin is death.”* It unravels allusions to our worthiness. Death is our destiny...but we know it is not our end. Unlike the ancient pagans that threw parties with food and drink so their dead could catch a breather once a year – Christians believe with death the feast has finally begun.

The saints of God in John’s vision from Revelation 7 celebrate however, not because they have resuscitated bodies but because they have purified ones. They are sinless now – the exist apart from that unquenchable thirst, that unshakable urge to please self above others...forever. The saints of John’s vision shout with great voices because they came through great ordeals. Revelation was penned for the persecuted church first off all.

But even if they had died peaceful quiet deaths they praise not because they are alive but because they are free...that Lamb of God they see, whose throne they surround – that’s who John the Baptist praised by the Sea of Galilee as *“the one who takes away the sin of the world.”* I cannot imagine what it will be like to live forever – to never tire, never hunger, never thirst, to see no sunsets or even have the faintest notion of what darkness is. I can even less imagine what it will be like to know nothing but love toward others – to be completely free of selfish desire, anger, jealousy, resentment. None of us can. But all of us will – that is why the church has an All Saints Day. We have a different story to tell the world.

So, we engage our memories today. Of Laurie. Ruby. Kay. Noel. Carrol. Lily. Tom. They are a pleasant memory even as their death is nothing like the “kind friend” poets like to romanticize about. It hurts and will always. Their high school pictures or wedding photos speak of a time when a grave was a distant thought, if it existed at all. Which is why we call out two other names today...Donnie and Elijah and dare even to call them our children, those *“what they will be when they grow up is not yet known”* infants – otherwise known as 8 pound, 24 inch little sinners, for baptism.

The first time the church addresses someone by name is when we say *“in baptism our gracious heavenly father liberates us from sin and death.”* As a pastor I can just about hear their families saying *“whoa...this my child’s baptism day...why do you have to bring that up?”* Because the church has a story to tell – and it can’t wait to get started telling them too – no fooling...no tricking our young - we tell them the truth - the baptism of a sinner is the making of a saint whose eternal costume is white – washed in the blood of the lamb. We’re not only NOT afraid to say that...we’re actually glad about it. The name of Jesus be forever blessed. AMEN