

PROPER 26, PENTECOST 23, YEAR B, OCTOBER 31, 2021

In the life of the church, today is considered the twenty third Sunday in the season of Pentecost, but it is also Reformation Sunday and All Hallows Eve or as we know it Halloween. What do these three events, if anything, have in common? I believe there is a connection and I'm going to try and weave the common thread together.

Let me start with All Hallows Eve or Halloween. All Hallows Eve was originally a religious holiday that preceded All Hallows Day or All Saints Day. All Hallows Eve has its roots in the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain (sow-in) which some say marked the beginning of their new year which started on November 1.

This festival marked the end of summer and the harvest and the beginning of winter. The winter was often associated with human death and the Celts believed that on the night before the new year, the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred. So, on October 31st they celebrated Samhain when it was believed that the ghosts of the dead returned to earth and the spirits of the gods were appeased with drink and food to ensure they and their livestock would survive the winter.

The Celts also built huge sacred bonfires as a protective measure from evil otherworldly beings and offerings were left out for other visiting mischievous spirits. They even wore costumes consisting of animal skins and carved root vegetables putting a light inside in order to take the "magic" of the sun with hopes the good magic would preserve their harvested food to last the winter. When the festival was over they relit their hearth fires from the sacred bonfire to protect them during the winter.

The importance of these customs to people's lives wasn't lost upon the early Church. Pope Gregory I advised a missionary going to England that instead of trying to do away with the religious customs of non-Christian peoples they simply should convert them to a Christian religious purpose like converting a pagan temple to a Christian church. This is how the Samhain festival was given a Christian context.

The early medieval church started to venerate saints not only for their devout religious beliefs and lives but also for the miraculous occurrences many believed the saints performed. The saints took on a supernatural persona for many people. So, the church mixed the traditions involving Celtic spirits and Catholic saints. In the 800's the church designated November 1 as All Saints Day and so the first night of Samhain, October 31 became All Hallows Eve the night before the saints were venerated.

Now many Christians also believed that lost souls would wander the earth until All Hallows Eve allowing them to do mischief to people they didn't like which led to people wearing costumes to disguise themselves from the evil spirits. The celebration of All Hallows Eve also included baking "soul cakes" for the dead and going door to door collecting these soul cakes in exchange for praying for the dead. Eventually, this practice, which was referred to as "going a-souling," in England was eventually taken up by children who would visit the houses in their neighborhood and be given ale, food and money. You can see how all these traditions turned into our modern day Halloween.

But today is also Reformation Day, the day that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenburg, Germany protesting the selling of indulgences to gain one's salvation. This act eventually led to what we call the Protestant Reformation. However, it was also Luther's study of Scripture that soon led him to oppose the church of Rome on issues including the priority of the Bible over church

tradition and the means by which we are found righteous in the sight of God. Luther stated that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, and good works result from our faith and you cannot buy your way into salvation.

Luther translated the Bible into German thus placing the Bible into the hands of the people. He reformed the Latin mass by putting the liturgy in the common tongue so that everyone could hear and understand the preached word of God and worship with clarity. He recaptured the biblical view of the priesthood of all believers, showing all people that their work had purpose and dignity because in it they can serve their Creator. He also lifted the unbiblical ban on marriage for the clergy and by his own teaching and example radically transformed the institution itself.

Now, why did Luther choose All Hallows Eve to post his 95 thesis? It wasn't just about the selling of indulgences for past, present and future sins to fill the coffers of the pope. It was also about a massive exhibit of newly acquired relics of saints that would be on display at the church in Wittenberg on All Saints Day in 1517. Pilgrims would come from all over, genuflect before the relics, believing they would take hundreds, if not thousands, of years off time in purgatory. Luther believed none of this was right. He wanted to change the focus from indulgences and piety to relics to the gospel of Jesus.

One of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses simply declared, "The Church's true treasure is the gospel of Jesus Christ." That alone is the meaning of Reformation Day. The church had lost sight of the gospel because it had long ago put layers of tradition that exploited the idea that you had to earn your way back to God over God's Word. His 95 Theses was intended to spark a debate, to stir some soul-searching among his fellow brothers in the church but it sparked far more than a debate. The Ninety-Five Theses also revealed the church needed a reformation and the church was never the same again.

Now onto today's gospel lesson. Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment and he replies love God and love your neighbor as yourself. When we hear the word love I believe we automatically think of romantic, affectionate love or a kind of familial or friendly love. We assume that loving God and our neighbors means expressing friendly sentiments to God in Sunday worship, and exchanging warm pleasantries with the people who live near us during the week. We forget that in the scriptures, the call to love is a call to vulnerability, sacrifice, and suffering. It's a call to lay down our lives for others. Biblical love is not an emotion we feel, it's a path we travel. As the children of God, we are called to walk in love. As one person said, "Think aerobic activity, not Hallmark sentiment."

But what does this kind of love look like in practice? In the Old Testament reading, a young woman named Ruth pledges love to her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth's vow is so impassioned and poetic, it's often quoted in today's wedding ceremonies. However, the story begins with three women, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah who have all been widowed. Their grief is palpable especially Naomi's whose husband has not only died but also her two sons. Ruth recognizes how bereft her mother in law is so her vow is one grief stricken woman to another. Orpah decides to stay but Ruth contemplates following Naomi even though she knows that leaving Moab with her mother-in-law and traveling to Judah will render her an unwelcome foreigner in a culture that has a history of expelling foreign women as dangerous. She knows that money will be scarce and her prospects for

remarriage uncertain. She knows that sticking with Naomi will require a reordering of her life. And yet she puts her legitimate worries, losses, and fears aside, and vows to love Naomi as herself. So, this vow of love is a vow of tenacity, fortitude, and sacrificial loyalty as much as it is a vow of affinity, affection, or "love". This is the love Jesus speaks of.

Now, what do these three events have in common. Bottom line, it is about loving God so that we can see God and our neighbors in a different light. By acknowledging the Celts and their religious customs the early church honored their celebration of the dead by incorporating it into All Saints Day which brought them to understand the universal love of God. It is something the church lost recognizing that God's love is imbued in many cultures and religions. Luther saw that the church had moved away from God's redeeming love to be an institution bent on paying your way to God. He paved the way for all people to hear and read the word of God to truly understand God's unfathomable love for all humankind. The scribe in today's Gospel recognized the truth in Jesus' words that love of God and neighbor is far superior than anything we can imagine.

The three stories show us how God works in the world in and through us and through our neighbors. There is no compromise on this commandment. You cannot love God and hate your neighbor. Loving God and neighbor is an understanding that we will strive to steadfastly be loving to one another despite our differences. It's a lifelong journey that we must undertake. The Good News is that this kind of love is achievable because God walks with us on this journey. We just have to remember to concentrate on the good and not the bad that constantly assaults us so we can turn our backs on the negative and begin the journey to bring about the love of God. Love is essential. As our Presiding Bishop Curry has said "If it's not about love, then it's not about God."

Let us ask for the grace to continually learn how we can walk in love with God and our neighbor. Amen.