

Glimpses of the Kingdom
A Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
October 31, 2021
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One of the scribes came near and heard the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question. Mark 12:28-34

Here's something I have never ever said before, from the pulpit – Happy Halloween! According to Google, the last time Halloween fell on a Sunday was in 2010, when I was in seminary. Since the work of seminary pretty much cancels your social life, I don't even remember that.

When I was growing up, Halloween was my second favorite holiday after Christmas, only winning over Easter because I could collect more candy at Halloween than the Easter Bunny left in my basket. But Halloween was always kind of scary. You would not find me on haunted hayrides or in any house of terror. There was something almost other-worldly about crunching through the leaves in the dark in our costumes, wondering if there really were ghosts or spirits close by.

Then, like beggars at doors of grace, we moved toward the well-lit front porches where kind people we didn't even know, handed out sweets for free. Moving toward the light yet knowing that even in the dark we were being safely watched by our parents from a distance. Only much later did I come to understand that we were not far from the kingdom of God on those dark, chilly nights.

Humans have always been fascinated by and deeply concerned about death, and what happens after death. Christianity is no exception – the death and resurrection of Christ stand at the center of our faith. And as we move through this season of increasing darkness, gathered crops, and falling leaves and temperature, we are sometimes reminded of death by these changes. Even if we are skeptical about witches and demons, we must all face the reality of death. The Church addresses this reality in these three days – October 31st and November 1st and 2nd. All Hallows' Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day have been celebrated in the Church since the 9th C, to remember those who have died and are now in the company of the saints in heaven. Church is where we can come to a deeper understanding of life and death, and of the saints who surround us.

In looking at All Hallows' Eve, Halloween, we can see glimpses of the kingdom of God. It's a night when the community comes together for fun, whether dressed as ghosts and goblins, or heroes and saints. It's a brief vision of how the world should be as neighbors love one another, sharing treats and taking great joy in the children and even the teenagers not quite ready to let go of childhood. When is the last time you gave something away just to see the joy and delight of the receiver? When did you last receive an unexpected kindness from someone unknown to you? As Jesus told the scribe, we are not far from the kingdom when we are loving God and our neighbor. It's in this love that we will find ourselves in the great communion of saints.

The porch light shines, leading us over the bumpiest sidewalks, and God waits for us to come out of the darkness to receive the gift of grace. We who have received this grace have more than enough to share with our neighbors.

Amen.