

Sermon, All Saints' Sunday

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17 & Luke 6:20-27

Preached Sunday, November 4, 2007 (All Saints' Sunday) at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

It was Trick or Treat time at our house a few days ago, this past Wednesday. Traditionally, our children have had little trouble deciding what sort of costume to wear. But this year was not like the others. One of them will soon be a teenager, so she and her friends were in the throes of trying to decide how to celebrate a night which is primarily for children. Meanwhile, our nine year-old son wasn't sure he liked the outfit he wore to Halloween Fest last weekend. So he tried a different one on Wednesday night. But he didn't know whether people would recognize the character he was trying to portray.

When we went to the homes of our neighbors, our son was a little bit reluctant about the whole thing. "Trick or Treat," he would say rather sheepishly. "Hi Will," they'd reply. "Now, who are you supposed to be tonight?" "I'm a spy," he said, from behind his dark sunglasses. "Of course," they said, "you look exactly like a spy!"

Fortunately, the volume of treats is not dependent on how effective your costume is. As usual, Will made out like a bandit. Knowing we were some of the only trick-or-treaters she'd see, one neighbor dumped half her candy bowl into his bag!

I wanted to tell you that story because, this morning, we are celebrating the Feast of All Saints. And, after 10 years of preaching, most of you have heard my message for this occasion: that all of us, by virtue of our baptisms, are saints of God and ministers for Christ. ALL of us, without exception. And what God asks us to do is live into this identity we have been given by grace. We are saints ... so we need to live as if we really believe it.

After 10 years of preaching this sermon, I realize I'm going to have to take this to the next level. Mere words aren't going to be enough if I want my message to sink in. So I want you to imagine that we are starting a new tradition at St. Philip's on All Saints' Sunday. We'd ask everyone to start wearing a special costume. I know it's customary for men and boys not to wear hats in church, but we could make an exception for All Saints' Sunday. (We could even have a competition for the best one and award prizes.) I'll show you the one I made for myself. *[PUT IT ON]*

I know what some of you are thinking: I've either lost my marbles or I must really want to be a bishop. Some days, I think the first theory may have some validity. But as for the second one, I can assure you that I have no interest whatsoever in being a bishop!

Why would I suggest such a crazy thing, that everyone wear something like this on All Saints' Sunday? I got the idea when I heard about a children's Sunday School class which made one of these for each of the students — and they all wore them when the bishop came to visit their classroom. (Apparently, he loved it!) I thought that was a great illustration of the fact that, in the Episcopal Church, anyone theoretically can grow up one day to be a bishop. Then I thought about what this hat symbolizes. It symbolizes the tongues of flame which came to rest on each of the apostles at Pentecost. It reminds us that bishops are descendants of the apostles. But, when you think about it, so are you and so am I. Everyone who is baptized into the life, death

and resurrection of Christ is an inheritor of the apostolic ministry. We are all part of that “great multitude” that’s described today in the Book of Revelation — “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” standing before the throne of Grace.

At the 11:15 liturgy today, we will baptize Connor Thomas Fennessy into the Body of Christ. If I had one that fit him, we could put one of these on his head. From today onward, Connor will be a minister of the Gospel of Christ and a member of the Communion of Saints. And we will pledge our prayers, love and support to help him grow into the full stature of Christ. If you want a definition of a saint, that’s a good one: someone who’s willing to grow into the full stature of Christ, with God’s help.

We want everyone at St. Philip’s to think of himself or herself as a minister, from the youngest child to the eldest senior. We take that so seriously that we put it at the top of the front page of the Sunday bulletin each week. If you’ve never glanced at it, take a look. It says that the Ministers of St. Philip’s are the Baptized People of God — period. Now, I said that after 10 years, I’m going to have to take this to the next level. So I think we ought to change this from the word “Ministers” to the word “Priests.” Which is to say that all of us are not just ministers, we’re also priests. That’s right, priests. If you don’t believe me, listen to the words of Holy Scripture. In the Book of Exodus, we hear God say to Moses that the Israelites “shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. ...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (19:5-6). And in the Second Letter of Peter, we hear that all Christian people are part of God’s royal priesthood: “Like living stones,” it says, “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood ... acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ...You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people (1 Peter 2:5 & 9; emph. added).

I had a clergy friend who didn’t believe the title of “priest” should be reserved just for the clergy. So some years ago, he tried to get the people in his parish to call him “parson.” Some of you may recall that the word was once used to describe the clergy because it reminded everyone that they were representative “persons” of the congregation. Not everyone can stand up in the pulpit or behind the altar at the same time, of course — that would be chaos. So someone is raised up from among the people to represent them, to celebrate the sacraments and to preach God’s word. (My friend’s idea didn’t go over — in part because his last name is Brown, and parishioners just couldn’t bring themselves to call him “Parson Brown.”) But he had a point. All clergy are also Baptized persons and members of the Body of Christ, just like you — and just like Connor Thomas Fennessy. Even a bishop is still a baptized member of the Body of Christ, and was a minister long before she started wearing her collar backwards and a funny-shaped hat on her head. We have four orders of ministry in the Episcopal Church: the laity, bishops, priests and deacons. We forget sometimes that the first order — the laity — is the most numerous and the most important! How would the Kingdom ever come if we left all ministry up to the clergy?

The best case I’ve heard for the priesthood of all believers comes from the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed, he says, are the poor, the hungry, those who weep now, and all who are excluded or reviled. Jesus says those who suffer have a unique blessing that the rich, the well-fed, the joyful and the respectable cannot experience or understand (Luke 6:20-26). If that sounds like bad news to you, just wait a while. At some point, we all will taste what it means to be frail, grief-stricken or excluded, and God’s special favor will then be available to us also. In that moment of feeling cut off from the rest of the world, grace and mercy will come rushing in — if we will open ourselves to it. And out of this very experience of vulnerability and suffering, we can minister as royal priests to the needs of our neighbors and the world.

Like so many things that matter, this doesn't happen all at once. It's a long process of trial and error, with suffering and loss intertwined with joy and happiness; all the while trying our best to keep the faith. The great author Maya Angelou says she is still amazed every time someone comes up to her after a lecture or reading and informs her that they are a "Christian." Her first mischievous response is always to ask, "Already??"* As she implies, becoming a Christian is a life-long endeavor, always a work-in-progress, which requires daily struggle with our successes and our failures. A poet put it this way:

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Does the journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.**

After my experience last Wednesday night, I'm starting to think that Halloween holds a key to celebrating All Saints. Since most of us don't consider ourselves to be saints, maybe we should think of it the way my son approached his Halloween outfit. Perhaps, each day, we should put on our identity as saints and try to live into it, however hesitant and halting we may be.

Then, when our neighbors ask, "Who are you supposed to be?" we can reply, "I'm a baptized priest of Christ, and I'm trying to be a saint."

The response might surprise us: "Of course! That's exactly who you are!"

AMEN.

*Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), n.p.

**Christina Rossetti, quoted in Synthesis, Nov. 2, 2003, p. 4.