

“Removing Our Masks”
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[Luke 19:1-10](#)

Tonight is our church’s Trunk or Treat, and tomorrow is Halloween itself. I hope to see some of you tonight, and maybe my kids and I will drop by your house tomorrow, as well! Each member of my family has our costume picked out for tonight and tomorrow. Dressing up is a traditional part of the Halloween celebration. People around the world will be donning masks, pretending to be something they are not. While the way that many celebrate Halloween these days is not very positive, Halloween itself actually has Christian roots. While we are celebrating All Saints’ Sunday today, the actual All Saints’ Day is Tuesday, November 1. All Saints’ Day used to be known as All Hallows’ Day. From All Hallows’ Day, we get the evening before being called All Hallows’ Eve, and “Hallows’ Eve” transformed into “Halloween.” The costumes that are worn on Halloween were originally disguises to guard against the dark forces thought to be roaming the earth on the night before All Saints’ Day. One disguised oneself as a harmful spirit in an attempt to fool the real harmful spirits into thinking you were one of them and so they would leave you alone. That’s where it all comes from, but I’m grateful for the costumes that are quite a bit tamer as I am not personally a fan of the scarier versions.

The day after Halloween – All Hallows Day or All Saints’ Day – is about remembering those who have gone before us in the faith. It is about remembering the saints, our forebears who have led the way before us. If Halloween is about putting on a mask and pretending to be something we are not, then All Saints’ Day is about removing the masks that we wear – and the truth is we wear our masks much more often than just on Halloween. And one of the reasons that we wear those masks is that we are afraid to reveal who God created us to be. All Saints’ Day is a chance to

recognize what God created all of us to be – and that is *saints*. The word “saint” is too often applied only to those the Roman Catholic Church has declared to be official “Saints,” but we are all saints. In the New Testament, there are 62 references to “saints,” with Paul using the term 44 times to refer to the Church on earth – and take just a quick look at Paul’s letters and you’ll see that the people he was writing to didn’t always act in the most “saintly” ways. The word “saint” simply means “one who is holy.” And “holy” means “set apart or dedicated for a specific purpose.” In our baptisms, we are set apart for Christ’s purpose. We are called to be set apart from the world, uniquely God’s own. Each of us is a saint – one who is holy – one who is set apart for God. On All Saints’ Day – and on all days, really – we should be reminded that we are set apart for God’s purposes.

There is a famous, oft-misattributed quote by an author named Marianne Williams from her book *A Return to Love*. She wrote, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.” God has created us to be powerful beyond measure, to be agents of light in a world that has too much darkness. We need to remove our masks, to stop pretending to be something we are not, so that God’s light can shine through us.

There is a story about a little boy who attended worship with his Grandfather one Sunday. Grandpa’s church had beautiful stained-glass windows. As they entered the sanctuary, the little boy’s grandfather told him that the windows contained pictures of Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke, Saint John, Saint Paul, and whole lot of other saints. When he got home, the boy told Mom and Dad all about it. The boy’s father asked, “So, what is a saint?” The boy thought for a minute, and then he replied, “A saint is somebody the light shines through.” That is our purpose – to be somebody the light shines through. We are all called to be the saints of God.

On this day, though, we recognize also the saints who have gone before us. In the Apostles’ Creed, we say that we believe in “the communion of the saints.” That is similar to what we read in

Hebrews 12:1: “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” The PC(USA) Catechism says: “Our communion with Christ makes us members one of another.” We believe that those who have gone before us are somehow present with us even today. We believe that their lives are a testimony to us and an example for us. When we gather in this place, we are gathering where our ancestors, both biological and spiritual, gathered on so many occasions before us. We stand on their shoulders. When we gather together, we are part of the witness of our predecessors and we are part of the communion of the saints.

Whenever we gather – not just on the day we are celebrating All Saints’ Day – but *whenever* we gather here, we worship together with all members of the church universal, both living and dead. It is important for us to celebrate our heritage and history. It is important to contemplate how those who have come before us have influenced our lives.

There is a pastor who describes All Saints’ by referring to the Vietnam Memorial. I would imagine that, even if you have not been to the Vietnam Memorial, you have seen photos and videos of it. The wall stretches on and on, with row after row of the names of the fallen in that conflict. When you stand in front of the wall, though, you will see not just those names, but your own reflection. The pastor says:

“This is what All Saints’ is like. We remember the saints, all of them, not just the more notable martyrs, but your Sunday school teachers when you were a child, your parents, the preacher, all those who have preceded you in this church and in the faith. And yet, as we remember their names, we see ourselves reflected in them. We join the procession down through the ages. We take our places along with them. We focus on the saints and we see our own contemporary faces reflected in their names.”¹

Yes, we today are a reflection of the lives of those who have come before us, and not just the pastors and the elders. We aren’t just a reflection of the ones whose names are recorded. We

¹ <http://thevicarofhogsmeade.blogspot.com/2008/11/all-saints.html>

are a reflection of the ones who worked quietly in the vineyards of the Lord with no fanfare. We stand on the shoulders of giants of the faith who were not regarded as giants at all. Jesus told us we are all students together of the Messiah. We are all children of the one living God.

Today, we recognize the saints of the past, even those who others might not have regarded as saints. When Jesus went to the home of Zacchaeus, the people around grumbled, saying “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Yes, indeed, that is exactly what Jesus did, for in communing with any human being, He is with one who is a sinner. A retired pastor I know used to welcome the congregation each week by saying “Good Morning, Saints. Good Morning, Sinners.” That’s a pretty good welcome, for we *are* both. On this day, many churches are celebrating Reformation Sunday. It is a commemoration of the beginning of the Reformation, out of which Protestant churches, including Presbyterian, were birthed. Martin Luther, whose nailing of his 95 theses to the Wittenburg Door began what became the Reformation, is known for his doctrine of “*simul justus et peccator*.” It means that we are at once righteous and sinners. We are saints and sinners.

We are like Zacchaeus, searching for the Lord. Sometimes, we climb up a tree to see him, and sometimes we put on a mask to hide from him. We are like all of those who have gone before us in this place. We are sinners and we are saints. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and as we discussed last week, tax collectors weren’t the greatest folks around. However, Jesus reached him, just as he can reach any of us. As a result of his conversion, Zacchaeus determined to pay back fourfold all of those he had defrauded. Jesus told him that those actions were signs that he had indeed been saved. Jesus helped Zacchaeus to remove his mask, to no longer be the one he had been before. Instead, he was now the one God created him to be. He too is a son of Abraham.

Maybe we look to the world just like Zacchaeus. Maybe when Jesus comes to our house, there is snickering from the crowd. Maybe we look like someone Jesus wouldn’t be around or *shouldn’t* be around, but that’s not the way Jesus works. Jesus came to seek out and to save the

lost. In another place, He said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." Jesus came to find those of us who are wearing masks, and He came to remove those masks to reveal the people we were made to be. He came to turn us into saints. He came to enable us to be somebody the light shines through. Friends, we are saints. We are holy. We are set aside for God's purposes. As we worship today in the awareness that we are gathered in the great cloud of witnesses, let us remember the saints of the past as we strive to be the saints of the present. Amen