
Sermon
Of Saints and Souls

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
November 1, 2009

First Reading: *Ecclesiasticus* 44:1-13 NRSV (Deuterocanonical)

- ¹Let us now sing the praises of famous men,
our ancestors in their generations.
- ²The Lord apportioned to them great glory,
his majesty from the beginning.
- ³There were those who ruled in their kingdoms,
and made a name for themselves by their valour;
those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;
those who spoke in prophetic oracles;
- ⁴those who led the people by their counsels
and by their knowledge of the people's lore;
they were wise in their words of instruction;
- ⁵those who composed musical tunes,
or put verses in writing;
- ⁶rich men endowed with resources,
living peacefully in their homes—
- ⁷all these were honoured in their generations,
and were the pride of their times.
- ⁸Some of them have left behind a name,
so that others declare their praise.
- ⁹But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been born,
they and their children after them.
- ¹⁰But these also were godly men,
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;
- ¹¹their wealth will remain with their descendants,
and their inheritance with their children's children.
- ¹²Their descendants stand by the covenants;
their children also, for their sake.
- ¹³Their offspring will continue forever,
and their glory will never be blotted out.
- ¹⁴Their bodies are buried in peace,
but their name lives on generation after generation.
- ¹⁵The assembly declares their wisdom,
and the congregation proclaims their praise.

Second Reading: Emily Dickinson. *Death*.

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.
We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.
We passed the school where children played
At wrestling in a ring;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.
We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.
Since then 't is centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

Sermon

Halloween has come and gone. But this year's celebration of Halloween is just the precursor for two significant, but often forgotten days. Most of us know Halloween as a secular holiday, a time to be silly, dress up in funny costumes, send the kids trick or treating and to have some fun. I suspect the religious connections with Halloween that most of us recognize have to do with some of the churches that – in recent years – have challenged its celebration on the grounds that it's about devil worship and other nonsense. And it is nonsense. But in fact there is a serious religious basis to Halloween, one that I think we need to remember. Halloween is partially rooted in the ancient Celtic religious festival known as Samhain which was a fall festival held at a time when it was believed the boundary between life and death was at its narrowest – a not unreasonable idea given that it took place in the seasonal transition between summer and winter. Such a festival is not unique; variations are found in virtually all religious traditions. But Halloween is also rooted in Christian tradition because it is the precursor to All Saints Day which is November 1st – today – and All Souls Day which is tomorrow – November 2nd.

In the Christian world All Saints day is most commonly celebrated and best known amongst Catholics, but it is not unknown to the Protestant world, especially amongst Episcopalians, the most Catholic of Protestants. You can see that connection if you look the phonebook at the names of churches. All Saints is a common name for Episcopalian churches. But I think All Saints Day is deserving of attention by Unitarians. It is supposed to be a day for the veneration of the Saints – all the saints. And with that thought in mind I think it is good to remember that Unitarians and

Universalist have Saints – not in the formal sense that Catholics use the term, but informally. Thomas Jefferson is certainly counted as a Saint as well as William Ellery Channing and John Murray and Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson. You’ve probably heard most of those names. Jefferson, of course, was the radical thinker who led his own personal search for the historical Jesus relying solely on his own intuition, a pair of scissors and a bottle of glue with which he edited the New Testament down to what he called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, a condensation that eliminated all the miracles and anything having to do with the Apostle Paul. It is known today as *The Jefferson Bible* and is a remarkable example of religious chutzpah that continues to inspire. In recognition of Jefferson’s contribution to our country his version of the bible is, for the last hundred years – one of the traditional gifts given new members of the United States Senate.

Channing, of course, was the most famous Unitarian preacher of the nineteenth century, the man who defiantly called for the liberal Christians of Massachusetts to embrace both the name Unitarian and the use of reason in matters religious. He spoke against an orthodox religious view that he said had placed a gallows at the center of the universe. He called instead for a religion that focused on life by insisting that salvation was not to be won by how one believed, but how one behaved an idea that would be echoed by Martin Luther King, Jr. – a man who we know read Channing’s sermons – when he spoke his dream of a world in which his children would be judged “not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” Channing was known well beyond Unitarian circles during his own lifetime, his collected works were a nineteenth century best seller.

Emerson, of course, was the Unitarian minister turned lecture circuit star who challenged Unitarians to shake loose the cobwebs of tradition and who established a philosophical basis for American individualism – the individualism that finds expression not only in modern day Unitarian Universalism with its individualistic understanding of religion, but also the modern day conservative movement of American politics. Emerson’s influence radicalized his most important religious follower, Theodore Parker, who – in the mid-nineteenth century – emphatically declared that the personhood of Jesus was not essential to the message of Jesus.

Almost every sect, that has ever been, [said Parker] makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves, or the authority of God, who sent him into the world. Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly, It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.

Parker’s colleagues were so shocked by his words that they refused to exchange pulpits with him, but today Parker is revered as a Unitarian Saint.

John Murray was the founder of the Universalist Church of America. Raised a Methodist he rejected the idea that a loving God could condemn people to eternal punishment for finite sins. He rejected the common practice of his day of preaching a gospel of hell fire and brimstone and instead said these words:

You may possess only a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

In the late eighteenth century it was a doctrine that shocked his fellow ministers and led them to send a letter to George Washington demanding that Murray be removed as chaplain of one of the revolutionary war regiments. Washington responded by personally confirming Murray's commission as a chaplain.

But there are other Unitarian Saints. One of the most important is Henry Bellows who is virtually forgotten today. Bellows was an important lay leader among Unitarians in the late nineteenth century. It was a time when the Unitarian movement faced the possibility of spinning apart over the question of whether one had to be an avowed Christian in order to be a Unitarian. Bellows declared himself a Christian – and at the same time insisted on the right of those who did not declare themselves to be Christians to call themselves Unitarians. It was a critical moment in our history. It was – in hindsight – the institutional acceptance of Theodore Parker's argument. The Unitarian movement became committed to the idea that religion should not be a question of the personality of Jesus – or of anyone else – but a question of underlying truth. It wasn't God's love of the world, but love itself that was to rule. It was also – by implication – an answer to the ancient question: Does God do it because it's good or is it good because God does it? The answer was that God did it because it was good, it was a declaration that might does not make right, but that right makes might. All of that flows out of the stand taken by Henry Bellows, the man who did more than any other individual to ensure the survival of Unitarianism as an organized movement.

And there are more Unitarian and Universalist Saints such as James Reeb – the Unitarian Universalist minister who was murdered in 1965 because of his participation in a civil rights demonstration. And in addition to such saints there are also all of the souls to remember. And all souls day is and should be of particular importance to Unitarian Universalists. While "All Saints" is a common name for Episcopalian churches, "All Souls" is a common name for Unitarian churches. It signifies our acceptance of all who share our commitment to a religion of deeds not creeds. And it is a reminder of our obligation to remember not just our saints, but all of the souls who have gone before us.

In that regard I have acquired a growing interest in the Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead which is deeply rooted in Indigenous religious practices. It's celebration begins today and is more than just a single day. It is a time to acknowledge the proximity of life and death. It is the custom of setting up shrines to family members and loved ones who have died. The decorations are often grotesque – with symbols of skulls and bones, but also fresh flowers, candles, pictures of the loved ones and favorite foods and drinks. The skulls and bones are shocking to modern sensibilities, so out of

touch with our way of life and our historic traditions – but they should not be. If you go to Boston and look in the graveyard at King’s Chapel – a Unitarian Universalist church that dates to the seventeenth century – you will find tombstones with similar features – evidence of a time when our religious ancestors lived with a continual awareness of how close life and death stand to one another. I believe it is that closeness between life and death that is the basis for a Mexican saying.

We die three deaths: the first when our bodies die, the second when our bodies are lowered into the earth out of sight, and the third when our loved ones forget us.

But I would add to that saying a fourth death. I believe we die a little bit when we forget those we have loved and who have loved us. The Day of the Dead is a time for consciously remembering our loved ones. That is why it is not a morbid occasion, but a time of celebration, a celebration that reminds us that those we love are still alive so long as we remember them. It is in that spirit that several people from Hope are participating in the Day of the Dead celebration starting today at the Living Arts in downtown Tulsa.

This Halloween season is a time not just for Halloween, but of saints and souls. It is a time to remember the saints who have shaped and formed our religious traditions. It is a time to remember all the souls who have gone before. It is a time for keeping tradition and memories alive. These are values that are universal, values that do not belong to any particular religious tradition. They are human values, the power of memory and tradition. They are to me a reminder of the power of community – a community not just of the here and now, but one in time as well. The saints of times past – from Thoreau to James Reeb and all those souls who are so close and personal to each of us – all of these are a part of our community, a part not just of our past, but a part of our present. We impoverish ourselves when we forget them. We impoverish ourselves when we fail to remember them. A part of ourselves dies when we do not remember them.

We cannot bring them back as they were. Saints and souls alike they remain in their graves. But saints and souls alike they are a part of us. They enrich us when we remember them. By remembering and honoring them we not only bring them alive, we bring ourselves more fully alive.

¹¹their wealth will remain with their descendants,
and their inheritance with their children’s children.

¹²Their descendants stand by the covenants;
their children also, for their sake.

¹³Their offspring will continue forever,
and their glory will never be blotted out.

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Amen.