

Sermon Proper 26 Year C RCL October 31, 2010

Given the fact that today is Halloween I thought I'd give a little background on it. Halloween is a mix of ancient Celtic practices, Catholic and Roman religious rituals and European folk traditions that blended together over time to create the holiday we know today.

The Celtic holiday of Samhain (sahwin), the Catholic Hallowmas and the Roman festival of Feralia all influenced the modern holiday of Halloween.

The Celts who lived in Northern France, Ireland and the UK some 2,000 years ago observed November 1 as their new year, marking the end of summer and harvest and the start of the long, dark, cold days of winter. Their feast of Samhain (sahwin) was when they believed that the ghosts of the dead would roam the earth. These spirits gave the Celts special powers. They would wear costumes to protect themselves from the spirits and prophecy for the winter. They would build huge bonfires. People would extinguish their fires at home and bring the new fire home for the New Year.

Feralia was a day in late October when the Romans traditionally commemorated the passing of the dead. The second day honored Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruit and trees. The symbol of Pomona is the apple and the incorporation of this celebration into Samhain probably explains the tradition of "bobbing" for apples that is practiced today.

In the 7th century Pope Boniface IV created November 1 as a way to honor the saints and counter the pagan feast of Samhain. Later in 1000, the church added November 2nd as All Souls day as a way to honor the dead. It was celebrated similarly to Samhain. Together the three

celebrations, the eve of All Saints', All Saints, and All Souls' were called Hallowmas. The term Hallows Eve eventually morphed into Halloween.

When the holiday came to America it wasn't celebrated much in New England because of our Puritan roots. But in the 19th century with the influx of immigrants Halloween was revived. Between 1920 and 1950, the centuries-old practice of trick-or-treating was also revived. Trick-or-treating was a relatively inexpensive way for an entire community to share the Halloween celebration. In theory, families could also prevent tricks being played on them by providing the neighborhood children with small treats. A new American tradition was born and has continued to grow.

When I was interviewed for the position of vicar one of the main things that the search committee and Vestry asked me to do was to help improve our stewardship efforts. Today is Stewardship Sunday, when all of us are invited to discern our financial commitment to St. James' Parish. Specially prepared envelopes for everyone in the parish are available for pick up in the church following the service. We ask that you take a packet home with you and pray over what your pledge will be this year. Please bring your completed pledge card to church on November 14th when we bless the pledges.

Our second reading today from 2nd Thessalonians provides an appropriate text for our reflection. Paul, on behalf of himself Silvanus and Timothy, is writing to a very young Christian community that finds itself being persecuted by the local Greeks as well as by the large Jewish community in Thessalonica. Paul is giving thanks for their faithfulness in the face of adversity. He prays *that "God will make you worthy of his call*

and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you.” First we see Paul acknowledging that the people have been called by God. His **hope** is that God will fulfill in them all that they are called to be and to do, and that all of it is so our Lord Jesus is glorified in them.

While this was the call of the early Thessalonians, this is also our call today. As people have shared with me the stories of how things have been here for the past few years, it is apparent that you have gone through a very trying time as a community. You have literally lived from hand to mouth to keep the ministries going in this place. There was great uncertainty. The vestry has had to struggle with what bills to pay and what ones not to pay. The pledges in 2010 were only about half of what they were just three years ago. Fewer and fewer people participated in making an upfront commitment to support the parish.

These past couple of years have not only been difficult for the parish, but many of you have experienced hardship as well...loss of employment or scaling back has been commonplace and placed huge burdens on you.

From my perspective the difficult struggles of the past couple of years are coming to a close. In my short 8 months with you I have experienced something very different. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, *“we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing.”* This is how I experience you... a community that is growing in faith and love of one another and this family at St. James’. There is vitality and an energy that

pervades this place. The spirit is clearly at work in your lives as individuals and collectively as a community. You have been faithful in the face of adversity.

As you will read in our upcoming issue of the *Scallop Shell*, I wrote that there is an expression that you can feel if there is love in a home or not. The moment you walk into someone's home you know if there is love there or not. The same is true of a parish community. The most common comment made by my friends and former parishioners who attended our Celebration of New Ministry on October 8 was that they could feel the love in this place...the genuine affection that you have for each other.

That is why I feel confident that each of you will help get our parish back on a firm financial footing with this 2011 pledge effort. Like Paul who boasted about the Thessalonians to the other early churches, I find myself boasting about you to everyone I meet in the Diocese and beyond. This is a new time for us; an age of hope and promise, let us rise to support the faith and love that God has planted in our midst. May we use the resources God has so generously given to us to nurture and feed the faith of our children, care for our elderly, reach out to those in the community who are in need, strengthen the bonds of friendship and affection amongst us, and praise God's name in this place week after week. Now I would like to call upon Tom Evans to share with us what this community means to him.