

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:1-12

I say to you grace and peace in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I cannot really think of a time to be in this pulpit that is more meaningful for me than to share in our observance of All Saints’ Day. Most of you are aware that most of my appearances here have been those of articulating thankfulness in services of death and resurrection for person with whom I had a very special friendship. Not too long after one such service, I told my personal physician that I was attending too many funerals and most of the deceased were younger than I. His retort to that was, “Most people are younger than you are!”

Now, please allow me to share some historical data related to the choice of words for the title of this homily, “Let’s Have a Feast of Fools.” Earlier, Mrs. Schaffer and I tried to convince the children that this was New Year’s time. They weren’t fooled. They were and are too engaged in getting ready for Halloween. Now, the origin of that observance can be traced back to the Celts, who occupied what is now Ireland some 2,000 years ago. They did, in fact, set November 1 as their New Year’s Day. It marked the end of summer and the beginning of the dark, cold days associated with misery and death. They believed that on the night before the New Year the boundary between the living and the dead became very blurred. So, on the night of October 31, they celebrated Sal win when it was believed that ghosts of the dead returned to earth to damage crops and cause other kinds of trouble. To scare off those ghosts, sacred bonfires were lit and crops and animals were burned. The Celts wore costumes usually consisting of animal skins, and they then extinguished the bonfires. After they were satisfied that they had defeated the ghosts and death, they relit the bonfires. By A.D. 43, the Romans had conquered the Celtic territory, and two Roman festivals were combined with those Celtic events to celebrate the passing of the old year and to honor the Roman goddess of trees and fruit.

Nowadays, we don masks and children trick or treat for UNICEF. We decorate with cornstalks and bob for apples at our parties. Civic groups build haunted houses, and charge admission to raise funds for worthy causes. You see, it all does have a historical background.

By the 1800s, the influence of Christianity had spread to Celtic lands. The reigning pope, Benedict III, installed All Saints’ Day in attempts to teach that the death of Christians was to be honored, rather than feared. In the beginning, that festival, which had its origin in the sixth century, celebrated only the death of martyrs, but later it was expanded to include all saints. The eve of All Saints’ Day became known as Hallow Eve, and is now Halloween. Now, the final message of All Saints’ Day is that death has been defeated, and so we celebrate with those whose names were read earlier.

In the Middle Ages, a new celebration emerged, known as the Feast of Fools. That event was also celebrated at the passing of the old year and the beginning of a new one. The experience was marred by attempts to mock even the church itself. A boy bishop would

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rule over a day of mis-rule, and no leader, ecclesiastical or secular, was exempt. Now, another holiday called the Feast of the Ass celebrated the donkey upon which the Virgin Mary rode, and later her son would ride, and was widely celebrated in France. Such burlesques were generally put down by the 15th century.

Now, out of all this, I perceive a need in A.D. 2005 to see All Saints’ Day as an occasion to say to a very deeply-troubled world, that though wrong is everywhere around us, God is still in control. It is not death, but life that reigns. Today, we joyfully anticipate resurrection, but maybe theologian Harvey Cox was right when he called for a modern day Feast of Fools. Maybe we do need a boy bishop to lead us in mocking the political and religious leaders who have created the tumultuous days we now endure with fear and dread. Maybe we do need to join the children on Halloween, and rebel against fear and death. Then, on All Saints’ Day, let us celebrate the heritage left us, not only by the persons who passed into a more real presence of the Lord during the year just gone, but with all of those we temporarily mourn during our lifetime.

Now, I want to suggest two ways that we might worthily celebrate. First, let us solemnly thank God for their having been part of our lives as we remember the joys and the contributions we shared as we were being nurtured in the faith. So, at this time, please silently praise God for those persons who made, as you perceive it, a positive impact upon your spiritual growth. Later, during the service, during the singing of the last hymn, you may want to come to the altar to pray again and thank God. Right now, I’ll wait in silence as you pray your prayer of thanksgiving for a saint who was special to you. Amen. Now, second and finally, let us reclaim that part of the ancient creed we call belief in the communion of the saints. Let us affirm the statement made by the Christ that ours is a God of the living, not the dead. Let us allow our spirits to join those of the saints as we look forward to our resurrection from the dead. On this 30th day of October, 2005, this is offered in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Let the people say, Amen.

When we’ve been confronted by the Gospel, whether we read it from the Scriptures or whether it is spoken to us from the pulpit, we are asked to say what we believe. Let me ask you please to stand and turn to #880 (The Nicene Creed) in your hymnal as we do say what the church has been trying to say for nearly 2,000 years.