

20141102AllSoulsSermon

All Souls Day is one of those Christian Feasts and Festivals that the official Anglican stance is a careful tap-dance on thin ice. You see, Article 22 of the 39 Articles states that we should not pray for the dead nor should we believe in the doctrine of purgatory where souls have to go through a time of purification before they can enter heaven. The corrupt by-product of this doctrine was indulgences which the church would sell so that a soul would spend less time in purgatory than he or she deserved and of course this selling of Indulgences led to the Reformation started by Martin Luther.

On the other hand the men and women in the pew wanted some means of approaching the throne of grace in petition for their loved ones departed. As we continue to commemorate the start of First World War it should be noted that the families at that time back home, wanted some way to pray for their loved ones missing or killed in the trenches of Northern France. So prayers for the dead gradually returned to liturgies and church services.

In a true Anglican way of trying to please all the people all the time, it is not called All Souls Day in our prayer books, but "Commemoration of the Faithful Departed" but the popularity of All souls Day is undeniable. It gives us an opportunity to give thanks -- as well as forgive -- those imperfect but loving persons who shaped our lives.

All Souls Day is an opportunity to remember deceased loved ones and honour the One who loved them into life and received them in death. All Souls Day reminds us that the veil between this life and the next is often quite thin. Our prayers radiate beyond this lifetime, bringing greater light to the journeys of our loved ones after death. Conversely, in the interdependence of life, the prayers and energies of deceased beloved friends and family members may support us on our earthly pilgrimages. If we believe in eternal life, which we do, then our loved ones, wherever they are, are praying for us here on earth as well.

I must confess that I am a bit of a pluralist when it comes to the afterlife. While I do not believe that we are perfected at death, I believe that God will heal and transform all creation and that all people will eventually find wholeness in God's holy adventure beyond this lifetime. Death does not end the human adventure, nor does it terminate God's love for us. The afterlife is a time of personal and relational growth.

Over the eighteen years that I've been ordained, many grieving families have asked some version of the following question—"Where is Dad now?"—as they sought to come to terms with the death of a loved father. My response has always been, "Dad is in God's hands. God's love for him did not cease at the moment of death." The same, I believe, applies to all whom we call "unbelievers." Death does not limit God's care. God's care continues in another dimension luring us forward from isolation to community, brokenness to healing, sorrow to consolation, and sin to grace. Even those who appear to run away from God in this lifetime will eventually run into the arms of the ever-loving, ever-pursuing God. The God who seeks our wholeness in this lifetime continues the process of soul-making beyond the grave.

I believe that beyond the grave, we continue to grow in wisdom and stature. We forgive and are forgiven. We experience the healing of memories and relationships, and continue to explore paths not taken in companionship with God. This applies to saints as well as mere mortals. We continue the journey, freely and creatively responding to the grace that leads us toward wholeness.

All Souls' Day provides us with the opportunity to give thanks—as well as forgive—those imperfect but loving persons who have shaped our lives. This year, I give thanks for the love of my parents and my sister Jean, for Karen's father, Ronnie and her step-father Jack who was a granddad for our children. I also give thanks for countless others whose love supported my journey so far. Death cannot sever our connections with loved ones. Whatever is loved lives on forever not only in our hearts but in God's healing memory and everlasting creativity.

Today we have commemorated All Saints and All Souls. Today is ultimately a day of praise, a day in which we remember that God is moving through our lives and the world, calling us—as God called those whom we call "saints"—to become more than we can imagine. And, the only proper response is "Hallelujah" and a life committed to bringing beauty and justice to the world.