

The Touch of the Healer: An Unlikely Companion

October 31, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Isaiah 53:4-12

Do any of you look forward to Halloween as much as my family does? My kids usually start putting in their Halloween costume requests sometime around Easter. And then, they change those requests about 374 times over the course of the next six months.

This was the first year that the kids both wanted something at least partially handmade – which was kinda fun. How do you turn black ballet shoes into sparkling red ruby slippers? Or an oversized t-shirt into a cape? That's the part I like. Playing with scissors and glue and glitter and making the magic happen.

I know that in a lot of faith communities, Halloween is really deeply frowned upon. Almost feared, even. Seen almost like a satanic holiday. But the truth is, it's not. Its early origins are actually closely-tied to the church.

Halloween is a day that, at least in the church, dates back almost 1500 years, back to the days of Pope Boniface IV in Rome, roughly around 600 A.D. In that day and time, the late fall was really seen as a time of introspection. As the days were getting colder and the nights were getting longer, without the conveniences of modern electricity; as the harvest season was drawing to a close and the annual crops would begin to wither up and die, or else shed their leaves or cozy up underground for the winter months, people's minds would naturally be led to the existential questions about life and death. During this season of the year, they would see a lot more sickness and death than in the spring or summer or early fall. (And actually, that's the case for us today as well – death rates in the late fall and into the winter are about 8-12% higher than any other time of year).

Which is partly why the holiday season – while it is a season of joy and celebration – can also be such a hard time for so many people. Because it is also a time that a lot of us associate with the loss of loved ones. Grief can be incredibly high during this season.

And so it's really no accident that 1500 years ago the early church named November 1 as "All Saints Day" – a day to remember and name, with gratitude, the faithful departed. Loved ones who are near and dear to us. They would also recognize heroes of the faith – saints, apostles, and martyrs.

Over the course of time, All Saints Day kind-of expanded, somewhat, so that it was not just a 1-day celebration, but a 2- or even 3-day celebration. In much the same way that Christmas Eve has become part of our Christmas; and New Year's Eve and New Year's

Day go hand-in-hand. And a lot of churches still do an all-night Easter Vigil with parties and baptisms and celebrations, leading up into Easter Sunday.

In the same way, All Saints observances expanded to include “All Saints Eve,” or “All Hallows Eve,” or, as we know it today, “Halloween.”

All Hallows Eve would become a day of preparation for All Saints, when people would mourn their dead, would pray for those who had died – particularly in Catholic churches where Purgatory was a core belief, the folks would pray that God would receive their loved ones from Purgatory into eternal life. It would also be a day of praying for the sick and the diseased. People would fast that day, or at the very least abstain from meat – and so, apples and potato pancakes became a traditional All Hallows Eve meal.

A practice called “souling” arose around the end of the 12th century, where people would make small cakes with crosses on top – kinda similar to hot cross buns – in memory of their loved ones. And then people called “soulers” – usually poor children whose families didn’t have the means even for a dinner of apples and pancakes – would go door to door and collect these small cakes, promising to pray for the souls of these departed loved ones. And thus, the origins of trick-or-treating.

Often, because it would be dark out, these kids would hollow out a turnip and light a small candle inside, making a makeshift lantern that would light their way from one home to the next. And sometimes, because it was dark and scary out, and they were dealing in the world of the souls of dead people, the kids would get spooked. And so they would carve faces into their turnips, to scare away any evil spirits who might do them harm – the earliest jack-o-lanterns.

After a few more centuries, the Protestant church split from the Catholic church (interestingly, on Halloween night), and in Protestant circles the ideas of Purgatory and praying for the dead really fell out of favor. All Saints Day remained as a way to remember and honor those who have passed away, but All Hallows Eve began to be looked at as little more than a Pagan holiday celebrating spooks and spirits or, more recently, a fun time for kids to dress up adorably and eat candy.

So, I’m not suggesting that we go back to the way All Hallows Eve was practiced centuries ago. Theologically, it just simply does not line up with who we are. However, there is one thing that I do like about it. And that is that on the night before people would get up for All Saints Day and celebrate those who they had loved and lost, the night before was set aside specifically as a space to grieve.

People would grieve as the colors of fall began to give way to grays of winter; as sunshine would be replaced by darkness. As the bounty of harvest would fade away and folks would soon be faced with little food except what they had managed to store and save over the course of the year.

They would grieve as they would begin to enter into a season that would more likely than not be marked with a heightened amount of sickness and death. They would grieve as they remembered all of those people in their lives who would not be with them this year to keep them company throughout the cold winter months.

They would acknowledge that even though the joy of the promise of eternal life is exciting, and comforting, there is still something about death that is scary, and sad, and mysterious. All Hallows Eve gave them a space to be able to name that, and to offer their fears and their longings and their griefs and their sadness to God – so that they could then release those and be set free to celebrate the joy of God’s unending grace the next day.

Sometimes I think that we as people don’t give ourselves enough space for grief. And I get why. Grief is messy. It is unpredictable. It doesn’t feel good. It’s uncomfortable, both for those who are grieving and for those who love those who are grieving. In scripture, when somebody would die, depending on who that somebody was, those close to the deceased would take anywhere from 30 days to as much as a year for no other purpose than to grieve that loss.

But today, in American society, the average time off that we take for the death of a spouse or a child? *Three days*. That’s it. And less, for the death of a grandparent, or an aunt, or an uncle, or a best friend. We have effectively said to ourselves, that the most profound griefs that we might weather are no more important to us than Labor Day weekend.

But the truth is, even though we may try to bypass it, skirt around it, ignore it, refuse to acknowledge it, grief is real. The pain of loss is real. And nowhere in scripture does God ever say to us, “buck up and deal,” or “just put a smile on your face and think happy thoughts,” or “it’s already been a month – it’s time for you to move on.” On the contrary, we have page after page after page after page of stories of people turning to God in their grief, and God receiving that grief and helping the people to bear it.

Today’s scripture reading does not tell the story of the death of a person, but it does tell the story of a deep grief. The death, if you will, of a dream. Of a way of life. Today’s reading was written during the exile, a time when the people of Israel had lost *everything*, including their hope that anything would ever get better. And during this time, the prophets tried a lot of different tactics to reach the people. Some of the prophets played the blame game: “If you had just listened to us before and turned to God when we told you to, none of this would have ever happened.” Or, “You see? This is what happens when you neglect the widows and orphans and those who need you. Let this be a lesson to you.”

Other times, the prophets tried the “don’t worry, be happy” approach. Or at least, the hopeful optimism approach. “It may feel bad now, but God’s got something big coming. Just hang on and you will see.” Or in some cases, “It’s not as bad as you are making it out to be. Plant a tree. Buy a house. Have babies. Make the best of it – and you might learn that you like it here in Babylon.”

But the approach that Isaiah is taking here in today’s scripture is different. He doesn’t say “it’s your fault;” he doesn’t say “make the best of it,” but he instead paints a powerful – and even somewhat uncomfortable – picture of a God who suffers. A God who doesn’t say “I told you so” or “suck it up, buttercup” but “I will sit with you here in it. When you cry, I will cry. When you weep, I will weep. Where you hurt, I will hurt. I will take your sufferings upon myself and I will walk this path with you. And in this, you will find healing and wholeness again.”

Happy Halloween! Now let’s talk about grief and suffering.
But here’s why I think this is important:

We are living in a world – and certainly in a country – that has been living a deep collective grief for a long time now. People we have known and loved have died. Others are sick. Relationships between people have become strained and in some cases even broken. We have seen a lot of change come at us rapidly, and with change – even the good change – always comes loss. As a country our physical health is struggling; our mental health is almost at a crisis point; and you know that our spiritual health is nowhere near where it needs to be.

And when we find ourselves in this space, we are prone to a number of different approaches:

- 1) We point fingers. Whose fault is this? Did the Democrats do it? Was it the Republicans? It was China. Or Russia. It was Congress. The governor. The bishop. The church council. The pastor. It’s lazy people who don’t want to work. It’s greedy corporations who abuse their employees. It’s all the fault of the idiot living on the corner who keeps revving his engine in a residential area, or the neighbor whose dog keeps pooping on my lawn. When our grief doesn’t have a place to settle, we will almost always start looking for people to cast it onto, looking for people blame. And that might make us feel better for a little while – energized in our anger – but rarely does it soothe our weary souls and bring about healing.
- 2) We may look for the silver lining. Try to find the good in the midst of the chaos. Look for meaning and purpose. Try to find new opportunities in the rubble. And this isn’t entirely a bad thing. They say that necessity is the mother of all invention, and that when God closes a door he opens a window, and we do eventually want to get to this place. The problem is, when we just jump right past our grief too quickly without acknowledging it, it is going to start to seep out sideways when we least expect it. Have you ever had one of those times

when you have yelled angrily at someone you weren't even mad at, or burst into tears when nothing is wrong, or had a panic attack in the cereal aisle at the grocery store? Very often, this is grief leaking sideways.

But Isaiah invites us to a different way. He invites us not just to jump straight into All Saints, without first sitting with All Hallows Eve. Not to jump to the joy of resurrection without first sitting at the foot of the cross. Not to return home to Judah before first facing the reality of Babylon. He reminds us that our healing comes, first and foremost, from a God who sits with us when we are feeling wounded and broken, and then God allows himself to become wounded and broken on our behalf, outright refusing to let us endure the pain and the struggle of life and death alone.

“By his bruises we are healed,” Isaiah writes. “The righteous one shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

So today, I would invite you to take the next couple of minutes on this All Hallows Eve, and in the quiet of your hearts, to name your griefs and your longings before God. If we were in a kitchen, we might bake little cakes and put crosses on them, having each cake symbolize a grief that we hold that we then offer up to God in prayer. But since we're not, simply take this next moment to name them. People, loved ones, circumstances, fears.

[Moment of silence]

O God, we lift the stirrings of our hearts up to you this day. Sit with us in our grief, and hold us in our sorrow, as we kneel at the foot of the cross. And by the loving sacrifice of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, help us to know the healing that only you can bring. Amen.