

Not Far from the Kingdom

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – All Saints Celebration

October 31, 2021 – [Mark 12:28-34](#)

Color: White

INTRODUCTION

The world around us is all about Halloween. It has become second only to Christmas in terms of decorations and displays. It is a big deal, to say the least. And it isn't hard to see the connections between what began as All Hallows Eve and what is now being observed, although we have to admit that frightening folks with depictions of the next world seems to many folks to be somewhat antithetical to the gospel. Whatever you choose to do about Halloween in your local setting, worship needs to focus on All Saints Day instead.

This is why we chose to create a “standalone” series for this day. Particularly in light of whatever ongoing issues there might be about grieving the dead over the past year and half, it seems good to spend some time reflecting on the promises of eternity and to give space to remember and to celebrate the lives of those who are no longer a part of the community in the flesh.

Last year, we suggested that All Saints Day might follow the pattern of the funeral service in the *Book of Worship*. It is important to note that we in The United Methodist Church don't call these funeral services, but services of death and Resurrection. That is an important proclamation in and of itself. Certainly, the pain of death is real, and grieving—both individually and collectively—is often a difficult experience that we face in different ways. But to proclaim the confidence in eternity is a powerful message and often sustaining for many who are missing loved ones.

No doubt, your local congregation has traditions around the observance of All Saints, and these should be continued. We do not have to reinvent the wheel each time we approach a significant event in the worship life of a community of faith. Keeping traditions is often a sign in the confidence of the God who sustains us. For those who are looking for innovation, it could be possible to build on the

familiar rituals with something new that doesn't take away from what has been done but adds something that could become meaningful in the future. Perhaps invite new voices to read the names or arrange the candles to be lit in different ways. Maybe invite the families who have lost loved ones to do the lighting or to carry the banner of names. If possible, project images of the people being remembered; ask for images of them engaged in an activity rather than in a portrait.

The mood of All Saints is one of celebration. Certainly, there is sadness in acknowledging loss, and there needs to be space for that grieving. Yet the overall experience is one of joy and hope. Therefore, we sing about the hope of eternity; we celebrate the cloud of witnesses; we pray for the sense of belonging together in community and the growth as disciples of Jesus Christ.

PREACHING NOTES

All Hallows Eve is not something that very many congregations are used to observing. Maybe Halloween, maybe All Saints Day, but that moment in the middle isn't on the radar for most. Yet it is rich with possibilities, and it would be a shame to miss it. The Celtic Christians called it *a thin place*, where this world and the next one moved closer together, and it was as if you could go from one to the other with one small step.

All Saints Day is one of those moments where we celebrate and remember those who have made the journey or who have taken the next step. We remember them because they are still a part of us, shaping us, mentoring us – maybe not in a direct way, but in a real way. We are who we are, in part, because of who they were. So, we give thanks for those who have gone before, whether immediately or historically. And through them, we remember that there are companions with us still. All Saints Day is a perfect opportunity to say thank you to those who are still with us, who still light our way, and direct our paths. And with them, we remember that we are all on our way toward the kin-dom of God.

"It's got to be the going, not the gettin' there that's good."¹ Where's that from? That's one of those song lyrics rattling around in the hard drive of my brain, left

¹ Harry Chapin. "Greyhound." Lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc

over from who knows when. I'll look it up later, just to satisfy my curiosity. But I don't need to right now; because in this case, I disagree.

Oh, I'm all for enjoying the journey. I used to tell my kids to look out the windows when we drove somewhere. "Seen it, dad," they would reply, "nothing there, dad." "Trees and road, houses and cows, dad." "Yeah, but," I'd argue, "odd-shaped trees, perhaps. Funny houses you'd love to live in, maybe. Mutant cows from Mars." Or maybe not.

Getting there IS what it's all about, isn't it? Otherwise, why have destinations in mind? Why have goals, outcomes, plans at all? We're on the way, we say, but to where? We'll get there, we say, but will we? How can we, if we don't have any concept of where we are going? It's got to be more than just the going that's good.

Now all of this random musing has come about because of a phrase that Jesus uses in our gospel passage for this week. It is a phrase of such hope and promise that it catches our breath. And yet it could almost pass you by if you aren't paying attention.

It's a familiar passage in a familiar setting. And so clearly significant, it is like a bright red flashing light that draws our attention to the center message. It is a message that we have to grasp, a message we have to wrestle with and claim as our own. It is a message that we have to figure out how to live in our day-to-day existence. "The greatest commandment," right from Jesus' own lips. How can we debate the meaning and value of such words? There it is in black and white – or red and white, if you have one of those Bibles!

And isn't it interesting that it comes in the midst of an argument? Or rather, a tag team wrestling match. It was a collusion of bitter rivals who banded together against a new common enemy. The Pharisees and the Herodians wouldn't give each other the time of day, wouldn't hand out a Band-Aid® to cover a bullet wound. And yet, there they are in the beginning of Chapter 12, palling around together in an attempt to trip up Jesus with their rapier-like logic. Only it doesn't work. Jesus out-logics the logicians. And when they are left hanging on the ropes, panting for breath, who should show up but the Sadducees. Now, both the Pharisees and the Herodians would rather belly surf in a pigsty than ask for help from the Sadducees; but in their desperation, they reach out to tag them in, only

to watch them driven to their knees in humiliation by the surprisingly unmarked Jesus.

All of that happens in the first part of Chapter 12. That's the scene that elicits the passage we are looking at today: a UFC cage match gone horribly wrong. During a commercial break, when the main contestants are catching their breath and stitching up the gaping wounds, this guy sidles up to Jesus and asks his question. Now, this guy is a scribe, Mark says. Under normal circumstances, a scribe is presented as a bad guy, a letter of the law guy, a stickler for the "whereases" and "heretofores" of the fine print buried in the back pages of incomprehensible legal documents. Mark tells us this with a sly grin and a "who'd-a-thunk-it" shrug of the shoulders.

"Which commandment is first of all?" (Mark 12:28.) And being a scribe, he knew in intimate detail just how "all" all could be! There has been a debate over the centuries concerning whether this was just round four in this melee and the scribe was trying to trip Jesus up just as the previous combatants had tried to do. But Mark doesn't think so, and neither do I. There is something different about this approach. Mark describes it by saying the scribe was impressed by Jesus. "He argues like a scribe," he must have thought to himself. Many would have seen that as an insult, but for a scribe, it was the highest of compliments.

No, it appears to be an honest question, a sincere search for answers. And that is how Jesus responds. "Hear O Israel," Jesus reverts to the *shema*, a traditional liturgy that every Jewish child learned almost as soon as he or she could talk. "The Lord our God, the Lord is One" (12:29). These are the words that are written on a scrap of paper and placed in the *mezuzah*, that little box attached to the doorframe of every Jewish home. As people would go in and come out, they would touch that box and recite the words, remembering who they were and whose they were. Of course, he would use those words. What else? Then follow them up with the proscription to love God and love neighbor. Jesus presented them both as though they were inseparable, two sides of the same coin.

There are some variations of wording between Mark's account and the Old Testament. Mark has four dimensions of this love – heart and soul, mind and strength; the Deuteronomy text has only three – heart and soul and might. But we can understand the shift by remembering that Mark wants to make sure that

Gentiles understand the totality of this commitment. To the Jew, the heart was the seat of both emotion or feeling and intellect. Greeks tended to divide the human emotion from the rational mind, so Mark makes sure we hear both heart and mind.

But for the most part, it is the same. Jesus reaches back and grabs a foundational statement and offers it up as answer to the plea. And the scribe grins and claps his hands, not in appreciation of the scholar who passed the test, but in the joy of knowing that what was in his heart is truth. When Jesus sees this joy in agreement, he tosses out the phrase that transforms this whole event from a back-alley brawl to a glimpse into eternity. “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34). Wow. No wonder no one could ask any more questions; they were stunned by the fleeting image of glory.

What we wouldn’t give for a statement like that from Jesus. “You are not far off,” Jesus tells us that is why he came, to seek those who are far off and bring them near. We want to be near; we want to know that we are close to the kingdom, close to the hope, close to the model for living that we are called to live – more than that, close to model for living that we long to live.

Mark tells us here that to get close, we have to live full out. We don’t hold back; we don’t keep a little in reserve. With all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength. That’s the only thing Jesus wants from us – everything.

Today, we may celebrate those who have given their all and thus are examples for us to follow. We give thanks to the saints of God, not because they are perfect people, but because in their living, in their struggles and successes, we can find a way to make the going good and the “gettin’ there” a joy.