

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

November 5, 2017 – All Saints' Sunday
Remembrance Sunday

This past Tuesday, children and teenagers in costumes roamed our streets, in celebration of Halloween, which is short for All Hallow's Eve. Just as Christmas Eve comes before Christmas Day, All Hallow's Eve comes before All Hallow's Day, or All Saints' Day, a day which many churches observe as a commemoration of all those who have lived faithful to their faith and their God. The following day, in many church calendars is All Soul's Day, a day to mourn the dead and give thanks for their lives.

In our church we don't hold special services on All Saints' Day or All Soul's, but we celebrate All Saints' Sunday on the following Sunday. This Sunday, we acknowledge our ancestors in faith and give thanks for them. We remember that we who are living are just one part of the church. We are part of the Communion of Saints, a body which includes the living and the dead.

Many cultures honour their ancestors. In Japan and many parts of Africa, for example, people venerate their ancestors, acknowledge their dependence on those who have gone before, and believe that they will suffer if they dishonour their ancestors' memory. But for Christians, it is our ancestors in faith who we acknowledge in this special way.

For some of us, our ancestors in faith will be the same as our genetic ancestors. Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents will be those who have been the most profound influences on our faith, who have modeled for us what it means to live as Christ taught us. For others, the influence of people who were not relatives will have been most profound. It may have been a god-parent, a Sunday School teacher, a neighbour, a minister, or a friend. For most of us, it is a combination of different people who have played this role for us.

Many church buildings contain memorials to the saints who have influenced the people of the congregation. When I was out in Ontario a few years ago for my aunt's memorial service, my father and I visited the church that he attended as a child, and we saw a window dedicated to the his grandparents, who were gone long before I was even born. But even in a relatively new building like this one, we

have a sense that those who have gone before are still very important, the dead are still very present and real, and their legacy endures.

In some Latin American churches, during the Lord's Supper, the names of those who have died are said aloud, and after each name is read, the congregation says *Present!* It is like a roll call, where the presence of those who have died is invoked. Their legacy is claimed and honoured.

That is a practice that we have started to do when, on the Sunday following a funeral, we display a picture, share some details of the life of the one who has died, and then say together, "Present!" But this morning, I would like you, if you wish, to raise your hand, and when I call on you, to speak aloud the name of a person who has died, and for whose faith and witness you are particularly grateful, and we will say together after each one Present! We will not be able to name every ancestor in faith in this way, but we will claim the importance for each of us, of some of the communion of saints, of the great cloud of witnesses who surround us all.

This is a great hope to us who are alive, that our lives do matter, and that when we die, who and what we are persists. This hope allows us to live and to die well, to offer ourselves in life and in death to the God who is able to transform us from lifeless corpses, into the communion of saints.

It is this of which Jesus speaks when he says that those who are poor now are blessed, for the kingdom of God belongs to them, and that those who are hungry now will be filled, and that those who weep now will laugh, and that those who are hated and excluded and defamed because of their commitment to the kingdom of God are blessed because their reward will be great in heaven. It is because of this hope that we are able to offer our lives for the good, that we are able to devote ourselves to the cause of peace and justice in the world, without fear, knowing that who and what we are does not end with us, but is taken up into eternity and becomes a part of the communion of saints.

Someone once said that nothing really important can ever be achieved in a single lifetime, so anything really worth accomplishing requires us to look beyond our own short lives to what will come after us. The Reformer Martin Luther, whose legacy we commemorated last week, was once asked what he would do if he learned that his life would end the next day. "That's easy," Luther replied. "I

would plant an apple tree.” We are in this life always planting seeds that we will never sow, and reaping a harvest that we did not plant. On this All Saints’ Day we celebrate those who planted the seed we are continuing to harvest, and commit ourselves to being worthy of their legacy.

Let us sing together a song which expresses our gratitude for those who have gone before. It is # 494, “Those Hearts That We Have Treasured”