

Sermon: Speaking to the Dead**Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-21****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 1, 2009**

Last night I walked the streets with a host of ghouls, goblins, skeletons, condiments, grim reapers and other strange creatures and random objects in pursuit of candy. My own daughters were a Roller Derby Girl, an Oompa Loompa, and an Oreo cookie and they scored some nice bags of candy, which Tracy and I will try to parcel out over the next month or so, only dipping into them ourselves occasionally.

But here we are on the weekend of Halloween, which is really only the eve of All Saints Day and then tomorrow, November 2nd is All Souls. It all has its roots somewhere in the Celtic pagan festival of Samhein when, at about this time of year, the dark of the night and the light of the day are equal in duration and supposedly this is the time when the boundary between the living and the dead is particularly thin, they'd say. Christianity adopted and transformed the festival early on to honor that thin place. But they adapted it to create All Saints Day which is a day to remember the faithful departed who have attained heaven, the beatific vision, and then all Souls day which was to remember all the faithful departed who are still in need of some process even after their deaths in order to attain the beatific vision. It's mostly a Catholic and Eastern Orthodox thing these days but some Anglican and even Lutheran churches still have a focus upon this time as a time to pray for and with those who have died.

So I realize that this might make some of us dyed in the wool Congregationalists uncomfortable to bring into our worship such a Roman Catholic feast but I for one have been thinking this year that all this focus on the dead is just too rich a tradition to ignore all together. I won't deny that the theology surrounding where the dead go has been manipulated over history by the church to maintain its own power of privilege. The selling of indulgences is one notorious way this was done which inspired Martin Luther and other to protest, but even today I'd say our own Protestant tradition has used after life theology to encourage or threaten people into line. But I also don't think we should throw out the baby with the bathwater and "the baby" on the occasion of All Souls and all Saints, is the reality that there really is a relationship among ourselves and the dead. Even if it's just a case of the genes of our ancestors that course within us or the reality

that if someone we love dies, that love – how it impacted us and lived within us – continues to form us in the here and now. Even on those basic levels I think it's hard to deny that there is a relationship that we have with the dead that's worth our attention, especially around this time of year, just as we enter into the darkest days of the year and approach some of our sacred holidays.

But the questions that brings us a little further down the rabbit hole that I'd like to pose this morning is this: beyond those evident ways that we are connected to those who have died, is there an ongoing relationship between ourselves and the dead that we can consciously participate in? Are those we can see and touch basically the people we can relate to in our lives or is it possible that those who have died, and specifically those who were either biologically connected to us - our ancestors - or deeply significant to us in our immediate lives - a spouse or beloved friend - is it possible that they are still accessible to us in some mysterious way, that they could still advocate for us and support us and their love and life whatever that looks like now can continue to be an integral part of our becoming?

I have to say that I grew up a Baptist in the south and it never crossed my mind that such could be the case. I mean, there was only one person you talked to who was there but not bodily and that person was Jesus. Partly because I didn't lose anyone significant to me growing up, but even then I don't think it would have dawned on me to speak, much less pray to the dead. Now this was amazing to Tracy, my wife, who grew up Catholic, for in her world-view this was as common place as praying and talking to God. Why wouldn't one speak to the dead?

I imagine there are many opinions in this room about whether this can be the case or not, especially for those of you who have lost significant others like children or spouses. There are probably those who could not imagine speaking to or praying to and for those who have died and others who couldn't imagine not doing so?

But I have to share my own experience for what it's worth. A few years ago I was really struggling with a situation in my ministry here in the church and feeling pretty stuck, at my wit's end. Tracy and I try to keep the boundaries of what's happening here at the church and our home lives quite distinct...but in this instance she knew in a general way that I was struggling with a situation and that it had been going on for a while and that I was feeling very stuck. And so one evening she said – “you know, Will, I think

you should ask your grandfather for help with this.” My grandfather on my dad’s side was a pastor for over 40 years and died about 6 years ago. Her suggestion stopped me in my tracks. It was the strangest most foreign thing to imagine that I would ask my dead grandfather for help with this and yet I immediately felt a “yes” response to her suggestion. I would try anything. And so in my regular prayer time for the first time in my life I offered up a prayer not just to Jesus or God but to the dead, to my grandfather.

And I have to say, after a month or so of being thoroughly stuck, the very next day after that prayer something remarkable shifted and opened in the situation. Really. If I gave you details of what shifted, I think you would be amazed. Now maybe it was just a shift in my own consciousness and presence that the prayer affected and so opened up a way forward or maybe it really was my grandfather advocating on my behalf. I’m hesitant to claim that I know one way or another, but what I can say is that it felt to me that it was as reasonable for me to think that the presence of my grandfather, my lineage that runs deep into the pastoral ministry, came to bear upon the situation, as it was for me to say that the change and its timing was just pure happenstance.

What I do believe is that there is an interior place that I might give the name “home”, or call it “the kingdom of God within” if you will, and that through my life at various points I have wandered from that road and at other points I have found my way back to it. But often there seem to be forces and voices well beyond myself that call me back there; forces, presences, voices well beyond what I see and hear in my day to day life calling calling me home to where I belong. The composer Stephen Paulus writes of this in his song The Road Home which the choir will now sing, but let me read it first:

The Road Home

Tell me, where is the road?
I can call my own,
That I left, that I lost?
So long ago?
All these years I have wandered,
Oh when will I know?
There’s a way, there’s a road?
That will lead me home?
After wind, after rain,
When the dark is done,
As I wake from a dream?
In the gold of day,
Through the air there’s a calling?
From far away,
There’s a voice I can hear?
That will lead me home.
Rise up, follow me,
Come away, is the call,
With the love in your heart?
As the only song;
There is no such beauty?
As where you belong;
Rise up, follow me,
I will lead you home.