

When pop culture transforms a "holy day" into a "holiday," it almost always manages to focus on the wrong side of the equation.

For example:

*The number of shopping days left til Christmas is NOT as important as the 12 day period between the Christmas day miracle and the season of Epiphany.

*A huge party, Mardi Gras, on "Fat Tuesday" is NOT as important as the forty days of Lent that follow.

*Eating all your chocolate bunnies before breakfast on Easter morning is NOT as important as rejoicing over living a resurrection faith on Easter afternoon.

*Tonight, while the world is preparing to throw itself a spooky, kooky All Hallow's Eve party, "Halloween" is NOT as important as is the celebrations it fronts for - All Saints Day and All Soul's Day.

Outwitting spooky spirits on Halloween is not essential to Christian discipleship. But remembering the "saints" is. Celebrating our ancestors in the faith, those men and women, some unknown, some esteemed, who lived and died furthering the Christian faith, that is the "holy day" the church needs to hold up to the world.

The Roman Catholic Church calendar still establishes a two day series of special masses and prayers that follow All Hallow's Eve - All Saint's Day on November 1 and All Soul's Day on November 2.

Those dates were chosen early on to coincide with the Roman festival, Parentalia, which commemorated those family members who had already died.

All Saints Day, which was known as All Hallow's day or all Holy Day-- commemorates the faithful who, according to the church, have achieved

heavenly status. All Soul's Day is a day to pray for family members and the unsung saints of the world.

The tradition of fear and trembling associated with the Eve of All Hallow's Day, or Halloween, came during the early part of the middle ages when the early Christian movement came into contact with the Celtic practice of Sow'-ain. The Celts believed that the day when there were more dark hours of the day than light was a "thin" time when the spirits of the departed were able to ooze out of wherever they went after they died and come harass the living. People wore masks to confuse the spirits, to chase them away.

Early Christians, when confronted with the powerful fear experienced by the "pagan" Celts incorporated the practice of Sow-ain with All Hallow's and all Soul's Day by saying that it was those unsaved—those in purgatory or worse—who slipped out on the Eve of All Hallow's Day.

As time went on, there were some of the in church who decided to cash in on the practice. Before the Reformation some overzealous fundraisers in the church gladly granted what was called a "plenary indulgence" to those who attended church services on All Saint's and All Soul's day. According to medieval theology this meant that if you attended church on those days your presence automatically released one soul from purgatory—you could save one of those wretched souls doomed to ooze out on All Hallow's Eve—tormented by eternal separation from God.

The problem was that eventually the church ended up with a revolving door of visitors. It was the theological equivalent of buying a fistful of lottery tickets instead of betting on just one number. Better odds. People with lots of dead relatives would enter the church, offer the name of their deceased loved one, exit the church, and then turn around and do it all again, theologically assured that each time they re-entered the church that day they were freeing another Purgatory prisoner. Those with few relatives would simply draw up lists of historical figures they liked and hoped to chalk up heavenly credit to liberate them.

This kind of incentive for church attendance is questionable, though it did work. ...ChristianGlobe Illustrations, Leonard Sweet, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.

But this is not the particular way of witnessing to others that holds much integrity in most of our minds.

Halloween offers Christians of varying theological perspectives an incentive to be witnesses. There are those Christians here this morning who believe that the eternal damnation of hell waits for those who do not believe or live a certain way, those who are outside the grace of Jesus Christ.

How very frightening is that! That concept is scarier than any sound which goes bump in the night! Why would any of us here want another to endure that kind of eternity? If this is what you believe, isn't it your job as a follower of Christ to do what you can to help others not end up in that place—to witness to them of the wonderful future we believe Jesus pointed to?

You may have heard about a young woman about to get married who said to her mother, "I can't marry him, mother. He's an atheist and he doesn't believe there is a hell."

Her mother responded, "That's all right, dear, marry him and between the two of us I am sure we can convince him." Yes, Virginia, There Is A Hell, Edward Inabinet

There are other Christians here this morning who don't focus as much on the fear factor of hellfire and damnation and the tormented spirits that make up that realm, who instead emphasize that there is horror in simply living in this life without the hope and strength found in Jesus' life. They see the demons of addictions that eat a person alive—the ghosts of guilty pasts that haunt their loved ones days, and they wish for something different, something better of them. If this is what you believe, isn't it your job as a follower of Christ to do what you can to help others not end up in that place—to witness to them of the wonderful future we believe Jesus pointed to?

When it comes right down to it—more than ghosts, goblins, witches, zombies, Freddie Krueger, Count Dracula and Frankenstein—the biggest fear we have in our lives is to actually talk about our faith with another person.

If I were to ask most of you to come up and share your testimony of how Jesus has transformed your lives, most of you would break out in a sweat, your knees start to shake, and eyes roll back in your head. Even if it weren't a public witness, but a one- on- one sharing with another, there are many of us who quake in our boots just thinking about how we wouldn't know what to say or how to say it.

This morning's text from the book of Joshua is one of those we can all bookmark when we think of our call to witness, and the fear factor that surrounds it.

Let me read to you the section just prior to the one that _____ read this morning.

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide: ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³ I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴ Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west. ⁵ No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

⁶ "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. ⁷ Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

In the face of fear, God has given us the spirit of strength and courage. God has put the right words on our mouths. He's given us the greatest commandments through Jesus Christ—to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—and love your neighbor as yourself. And God has given the Divine presence to be with us—to walk with us even through the valley of the shadow of death, where we shall fear no evil, for God's rod and staff with protect and comfort us.

This is our witness—the story we GET to share with one another.

Carl Ray's Story--

One of the saints of modern Christian Church, a United Methodist missionary, the Rev. E. Stanley Jones once said. "I am inwardly fashioned for faith, not for fear. Fear is not my native land; faith is. I am so made that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life; faith is the oil. I live better by faith and confidence than by fear, doubt and anxiety. In anxiety and worry, my being is gasping for breath these are not my native air. But in faith and confidence, I breathe freely these are my native air. A John Hopkins University doctor says, "We do not know why it is that worriers die sooner than the non- worriers, but that is a fact." But I, who am simple of mind, think I know; We are inwardly constructed in nerve and tissue, brain cell and soul, for faith and not for fear. God made us that way. To live by worry is to live against reality."