Practicing What We Teach

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,
"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat;
therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it;
but do not do as they do,
for they do not practice what they teach.
They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,
and lay them on the shoulders of others;
but they themselves
are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.
They do all their deeds to be seen by others;
for they make their phylacteries broad
and their fringes long.
They love to have the place of honor at banquets
and the best seats in the synagogues,
and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,
and to have people call them rabbi.
But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher,
and you are all students.
And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father
—the one in heaven.
Nor are you to be called instructors,
for you have one instructor, the Messiah.
The greatest among you will be your servant.
All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Practicing What We Teach

Matthew 23:1-12

Sunday November 1, 2026

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

As you may know, Halloween is my *very* favorite holiday of the year. The occasion when we practice the custom of endeavoring to scare the *bejeezus out* of each other. And, today is, as you must also surely know, perhaps one of our *least* favorite Sundays of the year, Pledge Sunday. The occasion when many preachers endeavor to try and scare the *Jesus into* their parishioners. So, this morning, I thought we would attempt to meld the two together and see if we can get at the notion of stewardship by taking a look at All Saints Day, Hallowed Eve, the practice of Costume wearing, Trick and Treating, Monsters, Ghosts, the Great Pumpkin, and all those spooky things which go bump in the night and frighten us so. Because, after all, Stewardship can be a very spooky and frightening idea.

II.

If we want to have an accurate understanding of Halloween, we must first understand All Saints Day. Though it is lost on many, it turns out that back in the day the Roman Catholic Church actually functioned something like party-central. Not unlike Julie McCoy, on the old TV series The Love Boat, the Roman Catholic Church was for centuries the cruise director and social planner for millions of people; calling them to feast and celebrate on any number of different occasions. Though there are many Feast Days attributed to a wide variety of Saints, the ecclesiastical Rose Bowl, the grand-daddy of them all, is All Saints Day, instituted in 609 CE as a commemoration of all those who have attained the sublime vision in Heaven. At the heart of All Saints Day is the fundamental belief that there is a prayerful, spiritual bond between the dead in heaven (the "Church triumphant") and those still living (the "Church militant").

III.

During the Reformation, one of the most hotly contested issues was the veneration and worship of the Saints on such feast days. So, in the Protestant tradition we moved to the notion of the Sainthood of *all* Believers where All

Saints Day becomes a celebration of the Church *Universal*: the living and the dead who in all places and at all times times, are bound together in the body of Christ. I can think of no more fitting point in the year to remember and celebrate all the Saints from *this* church than at Stewardship time. For it is on the shoulders of these folks that we stand; having offered their time, talents and treasure all of their lives to ensure that *their* church, which is now *our* church, would continue to carry out the Gospel of Jesus Christ here in Canton, New York. So, today, on All Saints Day, let us remember the Saints, our Saints, who have gone marching in from on the Park.

IV.

John & Shirely Wells
Margaret Cornell
Bernice Taylor
Randy Wilkinson
Bob & Billie Crowell
Anne & Frank Piskor
Jim & Ruth Chisholm
Eunice & Charles Urban
Inez Butterfield
Al Chadwick
Edythe Elmer
John Bevan
Betty Wells
Alice Huddleston
Fred Barbour
Fred & Helen Selleck
Alice & Bob Rogers
Grace Hall
Doc & Harriet Smith
Bill & Peg Stadler
Irene & Richard Miller
Bob & Mickie Williams
Bob Ferguson
Eleanor Erickson
Leigh O' Conner
Art & Rosemary King
Tom & Laura
O'Shaughnessy
Don & Betty Peckham
Tom & Janet Patterson
Fritz & Wanda Renick
Don Doig
Thelma Rodee
Clint McCoy
Lisa Peacock
Harry & Willie King
Margaret Maybee
Ed & Phyllis Pierce
Elsie Dana
Ethel Browne
Etta Heyler
Jean Shepard
Ruth Schairer
Gert Williams
Clisson & Barb Brown
Miriam Pries
Ron Scott
Winona & Ron Hubbard
Mabel Pritchard
Marylou Scott
Nick & Carlene Baffaro
John & Ginny Witherhead
Betty & Whitney Irish
Elmer Erwin
Paul Pickens
Gene & Shirley Seeley
Neil Coir
Wes Stitt
Barbara Klemens
Barbara Garrett
Maynard & Becky Bowman
Dick Mace
Rose Marie Mattice
Jessie Mannita
Joyce Bell
Tyke & Jack Miller
Joe & Helen Randi
Fred & Sandy Pollard
Bill & Lorna Webb
Charlie & Margaret Alexander
Betty Fraser
Shirley Norton
Ellen Janack
Barbara Klemens
Barbara Garrett
Martha Billings
Roger McBath
Marty Lyon
Galen Pletcher
Bill Rodee
Armond Spencer
Nicholas Boswell
Riley Basford
Alice Poole
Nancy Lyon
Ann Goetze
Gregory Findley
John Oliver
Nellie Locey
Carol & Allan Drew
Severn Brown (121)

Today we celebrate these people, and remember that we are forever bound to them in the body of Christ, manifested, specifically, through this church of ours.

V.

Originally, All Saints Day was known as All Hallows Day: a day set aside for the hallowed, or holy, or sainted. The day before All Hallows *Day* was All Hallows *Eve*, eventually becoming Halloween. With All Saints Day primarily concerned with those enjoying the *heavenly life*, Halloween became about those lingering in purgatory after their *earthly death*. So, on All Hallowed Eve it was customary for the town crier, dressed in black, to ring a mournful bell and call all good Christians to remember these poor souls.

Out of this began the custom of "Souling," where children and the less fortunate would go from door to door offering prayers for the dead in exchange for small round cakes, called "Soul Cakes." At some point those out "Souling" started to dress themselves in costume, called "Guising," and long around 1895, in Scotland, these "Soulers" and "Guisers," started carrying lanterns made from hollowed-out gourds. Eventually, this evolved into the practice of saying "Trick or Treat" upon the approach to a house, perhaps hoping to leverage the homeowner by alerting them to the downside of not offering a Soul Cake, or its equivalent, to those out "Guising" on All Hallows Eve.

VI.

The history and origins of Trick or Treating are actually not too different from the evolution of the notion of Stewardship in our country. Whereas people once supported a church out of concern for the tricky business of feeding, nurturing, and sustaining the poor souls in the community, in our modern era stewardship has become more of an effort to articulate the treat one will receive if you will only support the church from a business perspective. We've gone from how can we *give* to what can we *get.* With the town crier, dressed in black ringing a bell becoming the preacher, robed in black, banging a drum.

VII.

With Halloween's original focus upon saints, the dead and the damned, it was not a far distance to travel to get to witches, ghosts, and monsters as all are products of our fear of the unknown, and the unknowability which accompanies death. This is what make stewardship such a scary time for a church, as it asks the question: "What will the future bring?" Will it be a saintly existence filled with proclaiming the good news, and the acts of

goodness, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to so many poor souls? Or, perhaps, it will be another year of purgatory, with the church content to merely survive rather than thrive, resigning ourselves to the hope, or ill-conceived idea, that only prayers can deliver us from such a fate? Or, in the worst-case scenario, is it yet another step in the slow, steady march to the grave? For all things are born, live and, eventually, die.

VIII.

In a world filled with such questions and fears about life and death, it is easy to see why Halloween is such a popular occasion as it creates, if only for one night, a place in-between the two. A night of suspended disbelief. The scary isn't really so scary, however, as the threat of the trick is fairly hollow. While the treats, being quite modest, are rather easily given and obtained. And, the creatures which inhabit such an in-between place, the witches, ghosts and monsters, always seem to carry with them if not a benevolence, then at the very least the opportunity for others to act in a benevolent way.

Witches who brew up Bazaars, rummage sales and cabbage rolls, casting spells on unsuspecting parishioners, incanting "*Come and help, come and help, my pretty…*" Ghosts who haunt the church for years after their death, their voices echoing in the building and, over the ages, through the legacy they leave to the endowment.

IX.

Then, there are the *monsters*. So strange acting, so different from the rest of the world, that they must surely be born of some laboratory somewhere, or in the light of a full moon, or as the product of some horrible crucible. Monsters, who, rather than sleeping-in or playing golf every Sunday, engage in unfamiliar rituals called *worship*. Monsters, who, rather than constantly looking out for themselves, look out for the well-being of others. Monsters, who, despite heartache, hardship, and their own harrowing life press on in their quest, almost as if spirit possessed. Monsters, who, beyond all reasonable expectations, possess an eerie hope in resolutely suspending disbelief. Monsters, who, are seemingly super-human in their service to their Creator, in the strength of their faith in their mission, and in the tenacity with which they will go peacefully, but not gently, into that dark night.

X.

Now, my monstrous friends, we come, finally, to the Patron Saint of Halloween: Linus van Pelt. Since 1959, Linus has been sitting in the pumpkin patch every Halloween night awaiting the return of the Great Pumpkin. Unlike Vladimir and Estrogen, who wait for Godot with an empty sensibility, Linus is fully aware of the magnitude his conviction requires. Yet, despite the naysaying of his sister Lucy, his friend Charlie Brown, and all of his peers, Linus *doggedly* persists in his hope. This is not unlike we Christians who, in defiance of the naysayers of the world, persist in the hope of the return of our *own* Great Pumpkin. Though there is no question regarding the determination of our faith about such a return, there are significant questions about *where* we will wait, *how* will we wait and with *whom* we will wait.

XI.

So, every year at this time, we gather together to take stock of the pumpkin patch. What will it take to ensure the harvest for this season, and plant the seeds for next? Who will take the time to prepare the ground? Who will offer their talents to tend the crop? With what treasure will we maintain the land and fund the enterprise? Surely, these are the very real and important questions we must ask of ourselves each year at Stewardship time. However, a more important question as we sit here in the pumpkin patch is *how* we will wait for the Great Pumpkin's return? Last Sunday we heard about the Apostle Paul making the choice to treat the Thessalonians with *Gentleness*. This week, in our scripture reading from the 23rd chapter of Matthew, we hear Jesus admonishing the disciples to wait with *Humility*.

XII.

Let us not be like the Pharisees tying heavy burdens, so hard to bear, upon the shoulders of others, or ourselves. Let us not undertake deeds simply so that others may see, or conduct ourselves with pageantry or pomp as if these guises would hide who we really are behind such costumes. Let us not seek places of honor, or fawn for respect. Instead, let us actually *practice* what we teach: that all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Let us live out this other-worldly standard, as strange as it may seem to most, that the greatest among us will be the servant.

XIII.

For we proclaim the spookiest of good news: the hallowed name of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord, brought back from the dead, who humbled himself unto death, even death on a cross, so that all believers would be saints, and treated as the children of God. The trick for us, as we await his return, is to heed the master's call to serve with a monstrous faith, offering our time, our talents, and our treasure. To do so is to remember that our church though, seemingly, a humble pumpkin patch is actually a spirit-filled house benevolently haunted by the ghosts of the saints who have gone before us, insuring for us a glimpse of the sublime vision of Heaven here on earth.

XIV.

The contemplation of the demise of such a place as this is surely enough to scare the bejeezus *out* of us, and the Jesus *into* us. So, each year at stewardship time we proclaim, yet again, that we will not go quietly into that dark night. For we are the daughters and sons of the light who have chosen to wait with one another, practicing what we teach, and humbling ourselves, yet again, knowing that some day, in this world or the next, the Greatest Pumpkin will return and we shall be exalted. Amen.