

Sermon for All Faithful Departed, November 2, 2011  
Isaiah 25:6-9

Good Evening.

Tonight's service brings to a conclusion a three day cycle in early November commemorating the communion of saints and the faithful who have died. As we know, this is a time of year when our culture celebrates Halloween with all the associated images of haunted houses, ghosts, ghoulish things, trick or treating, and costume parties. But in the life of the church, this period is devoted to something far different – the commemoration of the church in this life and the church in the next life. In the church calendar, we have All Hallows Eve on October 31 followed by All Saints' Day on November 1 followed by today's observance, the Feast of All Faithful Departed. The Feast of All Saints' Day is a celebration of the Communion of Saints while today we remember those people of faith who have died and gone on to the greater life. I might add that today is one of two days in the Church year where black is the liturgical color for the day. The other day is Good Friday where red is the principal color and black is an option.

But today is also known traditionally by another name. In the Roman Catholic Church, this day is referred to as All Soul's Day. All Soul's Day was the day when the Church commemorated and prayed for all holy souls who were in Purgatory undergoing purification of their sins before entering heaven.

In the Anglican tradition, there are some churches that also refer to this day as All Soul's Day instead of the Feast of All Faithful Departed. It might be tempting to think that it is splitting hairs over which title to name November 2. But these titles are more than window dressing. In fact, I think there is a fundamental theological difference between the two names. Our collect today tells us that we are remembering the faithful departed – those Christian people who have gone on ahead of us. But All Souls' suggests a more inclusive approach.

When I think of this day, I am left wondering what about all the others who died outside of the Christian faith? What about those who are Jewish, or Moslem, or Buddhist for example? What about those who think of

themselves as unbelievers or who are unsure what they believe? Do we not care about all people, regardless of whether they are Christian believers or not? While this day does bear the title of All Faithful Departed, I noted with interest the selection of the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. In this lesson, Isaiah prophesies that the heavenly banquet is prepared for all peoples. It is not just for the people of Israel – rather in his vision he sees all people coming to the banquet.

When I was in the Congregational Development program at Seabury, I read a book on Mission by a South African theologian named Donald Bosch. There was a point that Bosch made that I believe bears consideration. In theological circles the Christian community is often referred to as “the People of God.” The People of God are the followers of Christ – those who have responded to God’s gracious invitation by giving themselves to Jesus. But Bosch makes the point that the designation, “People of God,” needs to be understood in a much larger way. He said that every human being, no matter where they stood on matters of faith, was counted among the People of God. Every human being is created by God. Every human being, as a consequence, is included in that fellowship we call the People of God.

Perhaps this day should be referred to as All Souls’ Day as a reminder that the Church commemorates and prays for all of the people of God, not simply the faithful departed. Perhaps our prayers this day should be for all souls, because everything and everyone belongs to God. While we have advertised this day as an occasion to remember those whom we have loved and lost, we might also consider as we come forward to light a candle, that we are lighting a candle as a witness not only for those we have known, but on behalf of everyone who has died. Let us pray:

“Into thy hands, O God, we commend the souls of all your people as into the hands of a faithful Creator and most loving Savior; beseeching Thee to grant unto them pardon and peace and, of Thine infinite goodness, wisdom, and power, to work in them the good purpose of Thy perfect will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Amen.