

CHURCH SERVICE

31 OCTOBER 2021

OPENING WORDS

We live within a great circle – a circle of time, a circle of seasons, an ever-expanding circle of community that encompasses all that is here on this planet and all that exists in the farthest reaches of the cosmos. To honor this circle, I invite the powers of the four directions: The East – Spring, sunrise, the place of childhood, the place of inspiration and new beginnings, and the home of Eagle; The South – Summer, midday, the place of innocence and trust, and the home of little Mouse; The West – Fall, sunset, the place of adolescence, the place of the darkness and looking within, and the home of Bear; and the North – Winter, night, the place of adulthood and bringing our gifts into community, the home of the ancestors and those yet to be born, and the home of Snowy Owl. Lastly I turn to the Sun, the giver of warmth and light to our planet, and to Mother Earth from which all life is born. I invite all these powers to hold us in sacred time and space as we meet.

WORDS FOR REFLECTION

Seeds carry life from generation to generation without end. Through the seeds speak the voices of the ancestors. Each time we plant a seed, we become the ancestors for the generations to come. Kenny Ausubel

SERMON

REMEMBERING

I am delighted to be here with you today on All Hollow's Eve or Halloween. I come not to join in with the celebrations extant in our culture today – ghosts and witches, black cats and bats, and ghouls and skeletons. I come instead to explore the true nature of this evening and the day beyond. I have come to remember with you the earliest beliefs about this time on the calendar and to remember those who have gone before.

But for the intervention of the early Church, this evening through to the eve of tomorrow would be a time for remembering, celebrating, and communing with the ancestors for the veil between the living and the dead is the thinnest during

this coming night. The Church could not allow this unholy tradition to survive believing it challenged the belief in sin, death and heaven so the Church undertook to co-opt these traditions. In the 8th century, Pope Gregory III declared November 1st as All Saints Day to honor those having died in service to the Church and passed on to the Kingdom of Heaven. The Church also renamed some Pagan deities as Saints as another way to erase Pagan beliefs and traditions. Though many at the risk of torturous death maintained these traditions over the centuries, the Church's focus on All Saints Day prevailed and Halloween became a eve of costumes, tricks or treats, and children.

In the Pagan tradition from sunset tonight until sunset tomorrow night, Samhain (Sowinn) is celebrated. It is the Feast of the Dead – a time when the spirits of the dead co-mingle with the living. Why this time of the year? It lies exactly between the Autumnal Equinox and the Winter Solstice. It marks the end of the harvest and the beginning of winter.

In the Pagan tradition, death is not to be feared. Old age is valued for the accrued wisdom and dying is accepted as part of the circle of life. Samhain (Sowinn) not only offers time for reflecting on our mortality but also for reflecting on other significant life passages – marriages, births, divorces, graduations, and jobs among them. It is a time for taking stock of what has gone before, letting go of what no longer serves, and making space for what can unfold.

Samhain (Sowinn) was celebrated with the lighting of huge bonfires. People brought harvest food and sacrificial animals to be shared in a communal dinner. From the sacred bonfire, families would take fire home to light the hearth for warmth and protection through the winter months. At home, they would create small altars containing fall crops and small skulls or skeletons to remember those who had passed.

In the Meso-American tradition, today is el Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and tomorrow is el Dia de los Inocentes (Day of the Children). Again the belief is that the veil between the spirit world and the real world thins or dissolves. The souls of the dead re-awaken and return to the families in the living world to feast, drink, make music, and dance. Here, too, the purpose is to honor death and the fall harvest. Families honor the deceased as guests and leave the deceased

favorite foods and other offerings at grave sites or altars in their homes. The altars also honor the four elements – air, fire, earth, and water.

I share this with you this morning as a lead-in for us and how we might celebrate today and tomorrow. How might we use this time when the veil is thinnest between those who have gone before and we who are living in this moment? How do we remember our ancestors? And perhaps a bigger question is, “Who are our ancestors?”

As I offer these questions, I am also mindful that we live in a culture that has little time for what has gone before. “The past is past, so let’s look ahead.” “Let’s focus on the new, the young, and tomorrow.” I wonder the costs of not remembering? How many times must we be reminded that grief at the loss of a loved one is not a 30-day experience and then we should brush ourselves off and return to normal? How many times must we be reminded that democracy is a living, evolving entity requiring our everyday vigilance? How many times must we be reminded that we are connected to everything here – the waters, the earth, the flora, the fauna – that all are our ancestors? How many times must we reinvent to wheel forgetting that those who have gone before knew something about wheels? These are some of the important costs of not taking time to remember.

Regardless the ancestor, these are the questions I would like to pose for us to take with us today.

What have the ancestors taught me about being human? About my place in the world? About justice? About honor? About compassion? About resilience? About fear and courage? About love?

These are questions to carry with you as you remember. And I encourage you to add your own questions for these are by no means the only ones to consider.

As we begin to consider these questions, it is easy to think first of our direct ancestors – parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, great grandparents and so on. As we begin to remember, it is important to not just remember the good times. Many of our most important learnings emerged out of the darkness – out of the pain of loss, abandonment, rejection, and being less than. In the crucible of life,

these, too, are gifts from the ancestors. Each experience is a doorway to our finding our humanity.

Of course, our ancestors are more than those connected by birth. Let us think about our teachers, our coaches, and mentors. And what about our heroes and heroines? And do not forget the philosophers, the writers, the poets, the artists, the performers, and others whom have touched our lives in ways that have helped each of us to make sense of who we are and helped us to know that we are not alone in this world.

Our ancestors are not just of the human species. Everything that is here on this planet consists of the stardust of the universe – we humans, all of the other fauna, all of the flora. These, too, are our ancestors. Each is part of the circle I call in at the opening of every service. What does each teach us about life? About living together on this planet? And what lessons from the most ancient of our ancestors, Mother Earth, must we relearn because we have forgotten in our haste and hubris?

In considering our collective ancestors, I must conclude that I am not a being of self-creation alone. No, I am an amalgamation of all who have touched me – touched my deepest being through their thoughts, feelings, and actions. And the more consciously I work at that, the deeper my connection to all that has gone before and the deeper my understanding that I am a dot on a very long strand of DNA that goes back to the beginning of time and extends forward into an unknown future. In celebrating that, I remember that I, too, am an ancestor offering my wisdom through my words, my feelings, and my actions. I would not be able to do this without remembering the ancestors. So on this Dia de los Muertos, and this eve of Samhain (Sowinn), please join me meeting again those who have gone before, thank them for helping us find our place on that long strand of DNA

CLOSING

I would like to close this morning with a poem by Robert Frost. It is entitled Closed for Good.

Much as I own I owe
the passers of the past

because their to and fro
has cut this road to last,
I owe them more today
because they've gone away

And come not back with steed
and chariot to chide
my slowness with their speed
and scare me to one side.
They have found other scenes
for haste and other means.

They leave the road to me
to walk in saying naught
perhaps but to a tree
inaudibly in thought,
From you the road receives
a priming coat of leaves.

'And soon for lack of sun,
the prospects are in white
it will be further done,
but with a coat so light
the shape of leaves will show
beneath the brush of snow.'

And so on into winter
till even I have ceased
to come as a foot printer,
so mousy or so foxy
shall print there as my proxy.

How often is the case
I thus pay men a debt
for having left this place
and still do not forget
to pay them some sweet share
for having once been there.

Thank you. Remember to take the ancestors with you. I release the circle.