



# First United Church of Oak Park

## **All Saints Day**

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 39-40 and 12: 1-2

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November 1, 2020

Scripture is often full of difficult pieces and parts to contend with, which can make it quite the task to preach on chunks of it that can either be taken out of context or are difficult to interpret for our current context. For our scripture reading today, I skipped 36 verses in Hebrews 11. In those verses are examples of the great faith many of our ancestors exhibited, like Moses, Noah, Abraham, and others. We pick up where it tells us they were commended for their faith, but never received what they were promised, at least not in life. And then I cut us off after Verse 2 in Chapter 12. It goes on to tell us all that we should endure as we persevere in this race of life while following Jesus, his example, his teachings.

This scripture passage is a favorite for All Saints Day because of one verse, actually a phrase in one verse. In Chapter 12, Verse 1 is the phrase, “We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” As a stand-alone phrase, I must admit I love the image and feeling it provokes for me. This is a reference to all of our faithful ancestors named in the Bible, all those who have gone, have died, before us, who were faithful servants, those we want to honor and remember. But I think the way this scripture passage continues, it jumps too quickly from death to life. Too quickly from what has been lost, sacrificed, suffered to the need to move forward, to persevere.

So I call to mind familiar verses from Ecclesiastes. “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven, a time to be born, and a time to die ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” Death, weeping, mourning — these are all seasons that are meant to be a part of our experience of life, and yet they are often not given their due months on the calendar.

Here we are on All Saints, when it is tradition to remember and honor our deceased. But one day does not a season make. Many look forward to this day

of remembrance. I wonder if that's because you feel such remembrances should be more frequent. I wonder how many of you grew up celebrating All Saints. What experiences or stories come to mind for you about this day? And in your family or culture, how do you honor or remember those that you love who have died?

Growing up, I don't recall celebrating All Saints Day. I have had many family members die starting at a young age, but other than attending their wake, funeral, or memorial service, there wasn't anything done to honor their memory in the years that followed. Whereas my husband grew up visiting the graves of his grandparents on their birthday or the anniversary of their death, and his family would attend Mass in honor of them that day.

My opinion that we don't give death its proper season and my desire to want to remember our dead more made me curious about how others celebrate All Saints or the other ways in which they honor their dead. All Saints Day has been celebrated by Christians for over 1,400 years. It is known and celebrated all over the world. In researching, I saw pictures from Mexico, the Philippines, Ecuador, Poland, Bolivia, Slovakia, Spain, Peru, Haiti, Bangladesh, and more. It has many names, especially when translated into native languages, but it is also known as All Souls Day or Day of the Dead.

And there are other cultures and religions that celebrate a similar holiday or festival at other times of the year in China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal, Cambodia, and Korea. Many of these have been celebrated since long before Christianity or the Bible.

The ways and rituals of honoring the dead include altars, candles, incense, visiting and cleaning gravesites, offerings of food, flowers, dancing, parades, traditional religious or cultural attire, and prayers. Each observance is unique to the religion, culture, and/or country. Each of the items or aspects of the celebration are meaningful and symbolic. In all of these examples of honoring the dead I see three things: 1. Faith: faith that there is something that comes after life. 2. There is great importance in keeping our deceased a part of our lives. And 3. Balance: balance of the seasons, of death and life, of weeping and mourning with dancing and celebration.

All Saints is a day when we as an entire people, globally, celebrate, honor, and

remember, those who have gone before us, but that doesn't mean we can't do that in our daily lives and in our own ways, too.

There are many things around my home that regularly remind me of loved ones who have died, and each time I see or use them, I remember them, and in this way they are kept a part of my life.

I am so thankful to be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses; it is a comfort to me. We cannot rush too quickly away from death or our grief. It is in allowing the proper seasons to run their course that we experience the wholeness, fullness of life. We can then move forward with them, those who have died, with all we have learned from them, shared with them; this is another way we honor them. So, yes, we will speak their names, and we will tell their stories, we will live embodying all they meant to us. So like our ancestors, who exhibited great faith — we are called as disciples of Christ, to tell the stories of our ancestors, of the Gospel, embodying and living out their teachings. This is how we are made one people: Their stories are our stories. This we should always remember. Amen.