



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “All Saints, All Hallows Day”

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A sermon delivered on November 1, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*You should be holy.* Leviticus 19:2

*Keep in mind that our community is not composed of those who are already saints, but of those who are trying to become saints. Therefore let us be extremely patient with each other's faults and failures.* Mother Theresa

*We find saints everywhere and in all times. Representing the ripe fruits of religion, they incarnate the divine and bring its love, goodness, and spiritual climate down to earth for all of us to enjoy.*

Manuela Dunn-Mascetti, SAINTS: THE CHOSEN FEW

### Sermon

Happy New Year! According to many historians, in the pre-Christian Celtic calendar, Halloween, a shortened form of Hallowed Evening, marks the end of one year and the beginning of another, much like our New Year's Eve on December 31<sup>st</sup>. Halloween divides the seasons of summer and winter.

We moderns also begin a new year of sorts by resetting our clocks to Eastern Standard Time and acknowledging that darkness is defeating daylight with shorter days and chillier nights.

On Halloween, Celtic tradition says the veil, that which divides the living from the dead, becomes perilously thin. That thinness makes it possible for the living and dead to cross over into each other's realm. The spirits of those who have died during the year are especially likely to be roaming this world, their spirits not yet able to find their way to the realm of the dead. Our Halloween festivities confront this possibility.

By donning the appearance of skeletons and ghosts we confuse any evil spirits that might be out and about, and we show we're not so afraid of death that we can't play with death. To appease any restless or evil spirits, people once left food or candy outside their doors to sweeten the spirits' disposition and encourage them to do no harm. Later, in England, begging for 'soul

cakes' in return for saying prayers for the dead became the custom on Hallow's Eve. From these various practices our own American 'trick-or-treat' traditions evolved.

For me, the evil spirits I'm most likely to appease on Halloween are my own. Paul and I consume most of the candy offerings intended for ghosts and ghouls, witches and wizards, and other costumed spirits who come knocking at our door.

Hallow's Eve was an attempt to Christianize the Celtic festival of Samhain (*soww-en*), meaning Summer's End. Rather than banning long-standing traditions like Samhain, they simply transformed them. In 601 Pope Gregory the 1<sup>st</sup> issued an edict instructing missionaries to use native people's customs for conversion purposes. For example, if a group worshipped the spirit of a natural spring, the priests should simply consecrate it to Christ and allow its continued worship. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century Pope Boniface the 4<sup>th</sup> issued a decree changing Samhain to Hallow's Eve, hallow meaning both holy and saint in Old and Middle English. Hallow's Day or *Alholowmesse* translates as All Saints Day in modern English, a time to remember saints, those religious ancestors who, while living, were model Christians.

Recognizing that transforming Samhain into All Hallows or All Saints Day hadn't totally eliminated its ancient pagan ties, in the year 1000, All Souls Day was added, to be observed on November 2<sup>nd</sup>. This new holy day echoed more of the ancient Samhain practices focusing on the dead. People were encouraged to pray for the souls of their dead and families were to go to cemeteries with food and drink. They also spiffed-up graves with flowers and cleaned tombstones. Hallowmas consists of this holy trinity of days devoted to the dead – Halloween, All Saints and All Souls Days.

By whatever name you call it, there is something within us that desires to appease the fearful forces of darkness and death. The mystery that is death loses its power when we mock and befriend it. These three days of death and darkness help affirm death's place in our lives. Though we try to ignore death the rest of the year, these ancient holy days remind us that death cannot and should not be ignored. We need to be reminded that death can come at any time. We need to be reminded to live our lives well now, not tomorrow, and not in some hoped for future that may not arrive. We should not greet the Grim Reaper with regrets on how we lived.

If we live without regrets, we can say, "Because I lived well, today is a good day to die." If we believe this truth, the end of our lives and death need not be so feared.

The word saint might conjure up people who are holier than thou—perfect humans so in touch with divinity they seem inhuman. In Roman Catholic tradition, to become a saint you must have lived a godly or Christian life, and in death it must be believed that you have interceded on

the behalf of someone who is living. Two miracles are typically required for sainthood. And typical miracles (and is that not an oxymoron?) include curing someone of illness, causing a statue to bleed, and other actions that defy scientific explanation and affirm divine intervention.

In Manuela Dunn-Mascetti's book, *Saints: The Chosen Few*, she writes:

Near the heart of the world's great religions stand saints -- transcendently holy men and women whose "otherness" serves as an example of God's grace to ordinary believers everywhere. As miracle workers, healers, and teachers, saints are the most tangible manifestation of God's loving power. They are deeply mysterious as well, for they are both wholly human and have privileged contact with the divine.

If we think of saints as other, as not like you and me, we miss their significance. Saints are canonized because they are very human. But in their humanness they found the strength to stand up against some adversity, including martyrdom. They found strength in their beliefs and they show us that we too can find the strength to do as they did.

St. Matthew, St. Francis, St. Nicholas, St. Christopher, St. Bernadette, and even that protector of those who might oversleep, Saint Vitos, comprise just a few of the many thousand Catholic saints. But saints aren't only Christian, as Dunn-Mascetti indicated in the passage I read. Jews have *tsaddiqim*, righteous teachers who seem to have left the earthly realm to channel the divine. Buddhists have *bodhisattvas*, enlightened beings who hang around to help others become enlightened. And Hindus have *sadhus*, holy men who renounce the world to focus on goodness and spiritual practices that may help them find release from the cycle of reincarnation. Gandhi was certainly a Hindu saint whose life models how to live at the highest moral level.

We Unitarian Universalists may not canonize saints in the manner of Roman Catholics, but we do have our role models, our saints. Francis David, the Transylvanian founder of the first official Unitarian Church in the 1560s meets my sainthood test. As does William Ellery Channing, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century American Unitarian minister who influenced our early development, and John Murray, the Universalist minister who might be our only claimant to miracle-maker. My personal favorite UU saint is Jenkin Lloyd Jones who dreamed up the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893 and actively supported early women ministers, to name only two of his many accomplishments.

Our saints are not only men. Women such as Susan B. Anthony, Judith Sargeant Murray, Olympia Brown, Clara Barton, and Dorothea Dix name just a few of our notable female role-models.

All these very human men and women I named stood up against those in power and spoke their truth -- some at great risk to themselves. We too can be saints like them. We can follow our

religious values and truths more closely. But just as those canonized by Rome were not perfect human beings, we need not be perfect. We can still strive towards greater perfection, greater integration of our beliefs and actions, and greater wholeness.

To be made whole is to be or become holy. In ancient biblical days, an offering to God had to be whole, without scar or blemish, to be considered worthy of God. Whole meant holy.

Aspiring to be whole is to aspire to be holy. Wholeness lacks nothing. I believe wholeness is being at one with our behavior and our beliefs. We are whole when our lives align with our values. No matter what your theology about God or divinity, we can be one, whole and holy, as individuals and as communities, when we bind up our differences, when we eliminate that which separates us.

I believe religious community helps us align our lives with our values. Each time you come here you have a chance to reset your life. We offer a chance for you to get in touch with what you value most and become inspired to live better. And when we balance our personal needs against the greater good of all, then we begin to live saintly lives. Although our halos will slip occasionally, we can continue to encourage one another each and every day.

On this holy day when we remember the lives of those who have gone before us, let us turn to them for inspiration. Let us turn not only to the canonized holy saints, but to the less exalted family and friends who've shown us how to live well. By their example we become who we most wish to be. And with the encouragement of those who still live and surround us here in this community, we can live lives ever more whole, ever more holy. And as we do, we will create a world worth living for and lives worth dying for.

May we always lift up our high ideals and strive to realize them each and every day.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What do you feel is the relationship between wholeness and holiness?
2. How do you define a saint or holy person? Is it a model of piety or virtue, a miracle worker or visionary? Someone who seems to have inner peace? An exceptional individual who animates the potential in the rest of us? A human incarnation of divine power we aspire to be like? Or...?
3. What 'miracle' would you like to see occur? Are miracles divinely-inspired?
4. Do we need more living saints to point us towards correct paths for inner or outer survival?  
Share.