

There are times in my life when I turn philosophical, especially when I take a moment to reflect upon how I have lived my life up to this point. Perhaps there are times in your life when you wonder, like me, *"What have I accomplished in my life thus far? How have I made a difference in the lives of others? What meaning does my life have? Who would miss me and mourn my life if I died today?"* These questions and thoughts were especially present for me the year I served as a chaplain in a hospital in San Francisco back in 2000. In that year, I discovered that sometimes the people who are facing imminent death are precisely the ones who have the most to teach us about how to choose life by living abundantly a life of faith.

Many times as a chaplain, I was invited into some of the most sacred places of people's lives, sharing with them the monumental grief of making decisions about life support and treatment, and painfully and prayerfully watching them as their loved ones slipped away taking their last breaths. I never failed to recognize the privilege and honor of being present in the sacred moments, witnessing the hovering of spirits separating us between the veil of this life and life beyond.

Today we celebrate All Saints. It's one of my favorite Sundays of the liturgical year. It is a day of remembering; when we honor and remember those whom we have loved and lost, those who have died in the faith of Christ, a day when we remember the faith of our ancestors and how we have been formed and shaped by their lives.

In the world of the ancient Celts, people believed the world of the living and the world of the dead existed side by side. Only a thin veil separated them. For the Celtic people, there was a belief that one night of the whole year, the veil was lifted, where they could suddenly see the two worlds meet – the land of the living, and the world of those who had died. And on that one night, souls could cross over, go back and forth across the threshold.

This festival Samhain (pronounced Sah-ween), was the precursor to All Hallows' Eve, or Halloween. November 1st marked the beginning of winter for the Celts. It was a time when cattle and sheep moved closer to homes and all livestock were secured for the winter months. Crops were harvested and stored. It marked both an ending and a beginning in an eternal cycle. The Celts believed that at this time, the "veil" between the human world and the otherworld became thin. Communication was thought to become possible between the living and the dead. In Ireland, preparations were made for souls who would visit that night – brushing up the hearth and setting an extra place at the table.

This was considered a pagan holiday, and in the beginning Christian missionaries such as St. Patrick, attempted to change the religious practices of the Celtic people. But Pope Gregory the 1st, in 601, instructed missionaries to use pagan rituals and customs and consecrate them for Christ. In terms of spreading Christianity, this was a brilliant concept and it became a basic approach in missionary work. Church holy days were purposely set to coincide with native holy days. Christmas, for instance, was assigned the arbitrary date of December 25th because it corresponded with the mid-winter celebration of many peoples.

During the first few centuries of the Christian church there was no holy day set apart to celebrate the Saints (originally those martyred for Christ). Christians honored the anniversary of the

martyr's death for Christ. Saints were people whose lives bore witness to the truth, to the God of love. At first only martyrs and John the Baptist were honored. Other saints were added gradually and increased in number. All Saints Day evolved as a celebration of those Christian martyrs that had died defending the faith. Gregory the III (731-741) consecrated a chapel in the Basilica of St Peter to all the saints and fixed the anniversary to November 1st, coinciding with the pagan celebration.

The purpose of All Saints Day is to honor all the Christian saints, known and unknown, who have been part of God's work through Christ upon the earth. It is followed by All Souls Day, in which the church commemorates all the souls of the faithful departed. We remember all those in Christ who have gone before us. Over time and through the reformation, **there was growing recognition that a "saint" was not a perfect or special person - that each of us as God's creation has the capacity to be a saint. And today, All Saints Day can be a time to remember those whose physical bodies have stopped working, but whose time on this earth permanently marked the face of creation.**

I have my own personal saints. I imagine you do as well. They are the people who by their words and deeds revealed the love of God to me. They dared to imagine that fear is often the first but never the final word. They strived in their own special way to be faithful, and in their faithfulness, they touched my life and gave me a gift of wisdom and the gift of love.

And so, as we remember those who have touched our lives, it often touches deep places in our soul where tears reside. All Saints Worship offers us special permission to cry and to share our individual and corporate grief. What I know is that each of us sits by a pool of tears, and every so often we need permission to shed them. And All Saints worship is one of the places that elicits the tears of memory.

As painful as it can be to remember, we are invited into this place, to pay attention, to hold and to name, to be thankful for the gift of those lives we have loved and lost. I believe that there are moments when the veil is lifted, between this life and the next, not just on All Hallows' Eve. There are moments when we can reach out to touch the holy, the eternal, and have the knowledge that our loved ones are not that far away.

We are not traveling alone, We're not just fumbling around in the dark. Our path is lit by those who have gone before us; who continue to inspire and motivate us who are still making our way to God. And the promise of Revelation 21... *God will be with us; God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. "See, I am making all things new. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."*