

“Great is Your Reward in Heaven”

Matthew 5:1-12

This past week, we celebrated what has for a very long time been one of the most well-known and widely celebrated holidays of the year. This is a time when we are meant to recognize spirits, think about gruesome deaths, imagine dead people rising out of their graves, and eating flesh and drinking blood.

No, I am not talking about the recent, corrupted manner in which Halloween is celebrated. I am talking about All Saints' Day (which we observe today) and the Eve of All Saints' Day now better known as Halloween. Oh, how times have changed, and not for the better. Do you know why Martin Luther chose October 31 as the day to post the 95 Theses 500 years ago? He chose this day because he knew that on October 31, all of the students and professors from the University of Wittenberg would be in church. October 31 is a Christian holiday.

On All Saints' Eve and on All Saints' Day, the people of God would gather together and honor the memory of those who had died in the faith, especially those who were martyred for their faith – like the prophets and apostles, many of whom died horrible, gruesome deaths at the hands of evil men. All Saints' Day is a day to imagine dead people rising out of their graves, because as Christ our Lord said: “I am the resurrection and the life.

He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” [John 11:25-26].

In days of old, this was a week in which we would have joined together on Tuesday, the Eve of All Saints, and celebrate with Holy Communion. Then Wednesday, being All Saints Day, we would have once again gathered around the altar of the Lord to commemorate those who have faithfully departed to join the company of heaven, and we would eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ as He comes to us in the Sacrament.

And then, of course, we would come back here on Sunday, we would follow the ancient practice of celebrating once again with the Sacrament, because every Sunday is a celebration of Christ rising from the dead on Easter morning. And, no, there is nothing wrong with celebrating the resurrection of our Lord on Saturday evening or any other day – and if you doubt me, read Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

Nowadays, except when we have a special celebration like the 500th Anniversary of something, other than our celebrating with the Sacrament on Saturday or Sunday, the only celebrations that are seen this time of year are ones acknowledging the pagan superstitions of ghosts and goblins, rather than communing with the “angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven.”

Those who do not understand what God has done for His people may find it peculiar that the Church celebrates the death of Christians. God is the Author of Life, why do we sing songs of rejoicing in remembrance of those who have died? Death is not just the end of life; death is the opposite

of life.

When death entered into the world through Adam's sin, mankind's entire life changed. Every aspect of our lives was limited by death. It was not just that our lives would not last as long as God originally intended. Nothing in our lives would be as God originally intended. We could no longer fear, love, and trust in God above all things. We could no longer love our neighbor as ourselves. Through sin, we create our own hell by coveting, worrying, and hating.¹

All of this was the result of sin and death reigning over and controlling our lives. But this is precisely the reason why we now gather together and rejoice, because sin and death no longer reign over us and control us. Just as all mankind was condemned to death through one man's sin, we now see that death has been defeated through one man's sacrifice on the cross.

Death has been defeated. Our Old Adam has been crucified on the cross of Christ and buried with Him through our Baptism.

The only real death that God's people will ever suffer is the one we have already witnessed when our sinful nature drowned in Baptism. Death no longer holds any power over us. Whether we are called out of this life after we have lived many years, or when we have lived but a few, death is no longer something to be feared. God has taken the ultimate judgment imposed on the world and has turned it into a blessing whereby His faithful people are allowed to stand before Him in everlasting righteousness,

¹Franzmann, Martin H. *Romans: A Commentary*, p. 97.

innocence, and blessedness.

One of our early Church Fathers was a man named Irenaeus. He was the bishop of Lyons, which is in modern day France. Many of you have probably heard me say something along the lines of, “The business of every Christian is every day being prepared to die.” For a long time this has been one of my favorite quotes of Irenaeus. So I actually looked up the quote to read it in context and found that I have been paraphrasing him. What Irenaeus actually wrote is this: “The business of the Christian is nothing else than to be ever preparing for death” (p.570).

Our attention to the fact that this may be our last moment on earth should be constant. In Christ’s teaching, He continually warns us to be watchful because we do not know at what hour the Lord will demand our life from us, or we do not know at what hour Christ will return.

So we gather today and acknowledge that there are spirits all around us, and we remember the death of God’s saints (especially those who use to gather with us here at Our Redeemer), and we imagine what it will be like when the dead rise out of their graves and soul and body are joined together for all eternity. And we do all of this eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ as we gather with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

It is with a victorious cry that we remember those saints and proclaim the words of Christ: “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” Amen.