

HOBGOBLINS AND FOUL FIENDS

Reading: Luke 18:9-14

This is the season of ghosts and witches and goblins, small and large. It is the season of pumpkins and jack-o-lanterns and tricks and treats and for those of you who remember – the time for ducking apples. Halloween, as you know, is a contraction from All Hallows Eve, the night before All Saints' Day – the day in the Church calendar when the dead are remembered in prayers. Though this was the time of the year when historically even in pre-Christian times the dead were remembered in ceremony and feasting. In fact the celebration of All Hallows Eve probably goes back to the Celts, the Scots and the Irish (but of course not the Welsh!!). Certainly many of our practices today come from those brought over by the Scots and the Irish.

In Medieval times this was a festival which was filled with superstitious fear. The dead were not simply worshiped and remembered, it was thought that wicked spirits also came back to haunt the living and it was thought that special prayers and petitions were necessary to let the spirits lie in peace. For the people of the time Hell was a real place and for a spirit to be left in Hell was a torment beyond all belief. The ghosts of our Halloween remind us of those days in which people did believe that All Hallows Eve was a time when particular precautions were necessary to stop the furious spirits from Hell from doing damage to the living. All Hallows Eve was, then, a festival filled with fear. The Scots made lanterns from turnips to keep the evil spirits away from the doors and windows. The Scottish pilgrims who came to the new country they found that pumpkins were in greater supply than turnips – and so we find ourselves making lanterns out of pumpkins on Halloween night.

All Hallows Eve was a time of fear – fear of the unknown, fear of what the torments of the afterlife would hold for the self, fear of our own vulnerability. How much do the fears and terrors of the Medieval All Hallows Eve still quietly haunt us? The fun and games that are the hallmarks of our modern Halloween cover the quiet shiver we all feel haunting us when we ponder the unknown. There are marks of the old feelings still left. We allow our children to dress up and wear masks. The masks cover identity and bring us into a make-believe world, a world in which we touch playfully the object of our fears. The very notion of “Trick or Treat” reminds us of the puckish and mischievous spirits that seem to haunt our dreams. There is something about that demand – trick or treat – that touches our sense of vulnerability. Confronted by the demand we sense that we are not totally in control of our lives, that there is something that can enter it and demand something from us that we might not be able to deliver. We are reminded that we are not alone and that we can be touched by some force that lies beyond us.

It is fascinating to ponder why in our sophisticated and secular world we make so very much of Halloween. We do not, like the people of medieval times, believe in the spirits of the damned roaming the earth in search of rest and comfort. We certainly do not believe that pumpkin lanterns will keep away those impish spirits from our doors. Yet our spines shiver a little, nevertheless. Our world is one in which we think we are in total control. Science is there to seek out the answers to our questions about the world and we expect answers from the experts. And surely there are experts enough. The only trouble with experts is that you end up with fifteen contradictory answers before breakfast.

But we still keep our Halloween. We still dress up as ghosts and witches, those imperious and mischievous spirits who roam the world of our darkest dreams. They speak to our

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vulnerability still. They speak to the uncertainty of our souls. They speak to the feelings of insecurity that haunt us at times when we feel that we are not in control. There is something very human in this feeling and we particularly sense this when we look beyond our human life. Stand on the seashore and look out at the water stretching out into the horizon's distance or to see the expanse of the Universe through the lens of the Hubble Telescope and we sense how small we are. The Psalmist says it well: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers... what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them."

When we think of ourselves in this way this little story about the two men who came to the Temple to pray can begin to speak to us. First is the very religious man who knew that he did all the right things, who knew that he was righteous and who knew he was so very, very good; and then there is the poor despised tax-collector, who knew he had done everything wrong, he had cheated and stolen and gathered wealth that was not his and he became deeply aware of his faults. What I find interesting about these two men is that they both speak the truth about themselves. At no point did Jesus say that the religious man was a liar about his actions. He told the truth about his good deeds, his religious rectitude, his being a person apart from the common herd. He was really super good. The tax-collector was certainly telling the truth about himself. Tax-collectors were notorious in those days. They could make a lot of money on the side with impunity, and this one was no exception. But if they were both telling the truth and the religious man was as good as he said he was, and the other was as bad as he said he was, why does Jesus say that it is the tax-collector who stood nearer to God than the man who did all the right things? Isn't there something unfair about that?

Why is Jesus on the side of the man who was so obviously bad? One thing we can say is that we have a kind of instinctive negative reaction to someone who portrays himself as so very religiously and morally right. Why is that? It cannot be because of what he does – for he does do good things, he is always doing the right thing. He prays at the right time, he gives the gift to the temple to help the poor and he'll see to it that all his duties are done properly. But we still find him insufferable because he is so self-righteous. He is simply too good to be true – he has set himself up as God, and he has no sense of his human vulnerability.

But look at the tax-collector and what you see is a man who has become deeply aware of his vulnerability. He knows he deserves nothing from God. He knows something about himself that the religious man seems not to have discovered. He is aware that he is all too human, a vulnerable human being who does not know all the answers and try as he may he cannot demand anything from God. This surely is what vulnerability is all about; in our awareness of our vulnerability we can discover the very presence of God.

The tax-collector discovers himself in his sense of guilt. He has done wrong, and he has come to recognize that simple fact about himself. That is not an easy thing to do. It certainly is not easy in our society which for the most part makes it standard to place guilt on someone else's shoulders. Guilt is always somewhere else and this makes it easy for us to reject responsibility.

Remember the bestselling book some years ago – *I'm OK; You're OK*. In some ways the book had some good things to say – that being judgmental is not a wholesome way of looking at others. But nevertheless it sums up the notion that we should not be judgmental about anything or anyone at any time. And this is characteristic of our world which tries to hide our vulnerability. It is an attitude which suggests that there is nothing needed beyond ourselves and our own kind. In our own secular way it is like the Pharisee of old who could stand in the temple and pray: "I thank you God that I am not like the rest of mankind – greedy, dishonest, adulterous;

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I'm certainly not like this tax-collector." Self contained, self-aware, filled with self-esteem looking down his nose at others because he had done all that was necessary.

This gives new meaning to Jesus' saying "O ye of little faith." Because if one can be so filled with the sense of one's own righteousness you do not need God – you are godlike.

Last Sunday was Reformation Sunday, a day in which we acknowledge our reformation heritage. Although I have not mentioned the Reformation what I have been speaking of is a central affirmation of the Reformers. They were most concerned that the church of the day had become a vehicle for the human attempt to manipulate God, a means by which humans could be justified before God by their practices and their deeds that they wanted to stress the fact that before God we are as nothing, that we must, like the tax-collector, recognize that there is nothing in life without God, and that we are as nothing without his hand stretched out to us to pull us up: that we are vulnerable. Faith is the recognition that we are nothing without that hand of God stretched out to us. The one who seemed to be the self-contained version of goodness was a man of very little faith. He did not see nor did he recognize his vulnerability in this world and before God.

The deep dark secret of our souls is that we feel this need for some comforting touch. We need the presence of one who is beyond our reach and beyond our own being. We need to know that there are dimensions to our being that are not compassed by our own certitude. This is what the Reformers were willing to die for and even to leave the comfort of their encompassing Mother Church that told them that it would put them at home with God. They knew that the hand of God was ready to touch anyone who saw and understood the need for God. But to understand the need one has to understand that we are but creatures who by ourselves are not the great experts on salvation. We cannot save ourselves.

When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

These words of Isaac Watts sum up the reformer's vision of God's gift, and our own vulnerability. Our own need and our own attempts to cover up that need by our own pride and sense of invulnerability.

Halloween may be our own gauche way of reminding ourselves that there is more in our world than we can ever dream of. It may have reduced itself to pretty pumpkins and delightful children dressing up to delight us. But it does in its own curious way remind us of the dark night of the soul which feels empty without the presence of God. It reminds us also of the need for a fulfillment in our own selves of a life which should not go into darkness without a sense that God has overcome the guilt and sorrow of life. We have nothing to take to god except our own weak and vulnerable selves. But God accepts us, and again in the words of Isaac Watts:

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

John S. Morris
First Baptist Church, Hamilton, NY
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