

Fear is the Mind Killer
Lake Street Church of Evanston
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I will confess that Halloween is my favorite holiday of the year. The celebration of fall, the enthusiastic “yes!” to creativity, spooky decorations and movies, candles, jack-o-lanterns, it is a holiday that spoke to me when I was 5, and would speak to me if I lived to see 95. And yet I want to delve deeper into this holiday for a moment and try to figure out what work it does in our imagination and what it may tell us about fear. In general, I find myself just as excited about Halloween this year, but I find a society that has a lot of fear, but they too seem to be excited about Halloween. Why is that? Why do we need a dose of ghouls, goblins, Thomas the tank engines, or other fun costumes? I should note that this is also one of the topics that people asked about in our instant sermon series way back – fear. How do we chart a path through fear? That was the question.

So, let’s talk about Halloween. Halloween has deeply religious roots, but not the kind that folks mean when they say religious. Usually religious is a stand in for Christian, but Halloween comes to us from that general ritual that is older than organized religion, marking the transfer from summer and months of plenty to winter and the months of need. It is the natural time for herds people to take count of their stocks, move cattle to other locations and figure out how to make it through the winter. And so they drank and built bonfires and dressed as the spirits of the dead or other beasts. It was a sacred time, but the Puritans and other puritanical spirits in Christianity probably wouldn’t have thought so. Halloween gets its big push in America not through the fact that it comes directly before All Saints Day, but for the fact that Irish immigrants brought their traditions with them en masse in the 19th century, bringing with them the idea of Samhain merged with the religious undertones of All Hallows Even. In fact, the reason that All Saints Day falls on November 1st was because of shrewd Pope Gregory who knew that both Germanic and Gaelic pagans commemorated the dead at the start of winter and wanted to Christianize that remembrance.

But Halloween plays a role in the Christian church year too, I don’t want to neglect that. I want to let Brother James Coester, an Anglican monk who is at the Society of Saint John the Evangelist in Harvard Square describe what role the tryptich of Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls day, the start of the month as he describes it as, “the month of the Holy Dead.” This is what he has to say:

These three days, this ‘November Triduum’ of All Hallows’ Even, All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days hold for us the same stark reality as does the Easter Triduum of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. That reality is that death is real. Just as we look death in the face during the Easter Triduum, during this November Triduum, death comes knocking at our doors. It may come in the guise of cute

children dressed up in all manner of costumes, begging candy from you or threatening tricks, but our pre-Christian and Christian ancestors in the faith would recognize Hallowe'en as that night when you stared at, and stared down, death.

And that is perhaps the most thought provoking take on Halloween that I've read in my time as a minister. That's the real scary thing – death, and in the start of this month and next week, we dive down deeper into understanding the fact that no one makes it out of this life alive, and yet the lives we live are filled with wonder and glory.

So, there is a vulnerability to Halloween that is not just about playing around with death, decay, and fearful beasts – you may dress up as something that you truly love, or you may reveal your true self to other people on Halloween, because you feel like all the other days of the year you're not allowed to do so. What makes Halloween so fun and accessible, even with all the scary subject matter is that it is really a shared practice of vulnerability. Yes, you could make fun of someone's homemade costume, make fun of the fact that they like a different hobby than you, you could tell someone something hurtful, but I can almost guarantee that you won't, and you won't not just because it's rude but because it goes against the very spirit of Halloween and of shared vulnerability. It goes against the shared ethos of vulnerability and creativity that form the bedrock of any Halloween event.

We often experience our vulnerability not as shared but as isolated. That we alone are vulnerable. That we are the only one in the room who is experiencing these feeling, or any feelings at all. But in trick or treating, all around you are people who have said yes to this festivity, who are putting it all out on display, who are “in the arena,” as Brené Brown, a great author about vulnerability puts it. Odds are, if you don't want to be alone on Halloween, you won't be. You'll be with plenty of your closest friends.

You see, the fear that we face isn't that ghouls or goblins will come to our door, the fears that we face are primal and basic. Death, the fact that we're not good enough, the anxiety around making ends meet, the sense that we're not living up to our potential. That fear as one of the characters in the sci-fi classic Frank Herbert's *Dune* puts it, “is the mind-killer.” It makes rational action impossible, and I will tell you that it makes empathic, vulnerable, good actions impossible too. When we are fearful, we are not going to be living up to our call to be truly us.

And what we're called to do in Paul's epistle this morning is to truly know ourselves and to know God, and to know ourselves and show ourselves even as we are truly known that requires vulnerability. It requires a radical yes to the sacrality of the world we inhabit. It requires that we not go into our shells, that we not go into a protective mode that means we can't share with others. No – we must be vulnerable and we must be vulnerable in a shared way. Fear is the mind killer, but vulnerability is the antidote to our current society's ails. Halloween can't solve all our problems, but it sure can teach us something.