

Reflection, October 30-31, 2021, 31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

John Rietschlin

As the hours of daylight continue to shorten, this weekend we reach the beginning of the great fall triduum of All Hallows Eve (today/Sunday), All Saints Day (also called All Hallows' in some places and times) and All Souls Day. Many of us will begin our celebration of this fall Triduum by welcoming Trick or Treaters at our doors. Our popular culture provides this faint echo of the former custom of sharing "soul cakes" with the poor, often children, on All Hallows' Eve in exchange for their promise to pray for the dead, especially the souls of deceased friends and family members of the giver.

The fall Triduum, sometimes called Allhallowtide, was first celebrated in some parts of the church over 1000 years ago. In the northern hemisphere, it occurs during a season where the life and light and warmth of summer give way to the dark and cold and death of winter. But it occurs also in the knowledge that winter will give way to spring and new life...over and over and over again. These three feasts of All Hallows' Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls Day remind us that we are all part of the great flow of humanity—those who have gone before, those here now, and those to come.

But why are we here? Today's scripture readings provide a clear answer to that question. We hear it first in the Book of Deuteronomy as taught by Moses and then over 1000 years later in the words of Jesus responding to the scribe's question of which is the greatest commandment. Jesus says:

"The first is, Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Well, the answer is clear, but it is not straightforward. Possibly more words have been written and more sermons have been preached trying to unpack the meaning of these two great commandments than any other topic in scripture. I am not going to better the many writers, preachers and scholars who have gone before me in this task, but I offer a few personal reflections.

Like all of you, I suspect, my faith journey has been and continues to be a quest to understand what living these two great commandments might mean for me. In my best moments I learn from my family and friends, from the events and the news stories around me, from the beauty of the

creation that the Lord our God has given us. In my moments of weakness and darkness, I struggle not to retreat within myself turning my back on God and my neighbor. Fortunately, God's grace—working through the love of those same people and the beauty of that same creation—eventually brings me back, though sometimes not without a fight.

Just a few examples.

In the spring of 2020, our eldest daughter Amanda died following a ten-year journey with cancer. It was a dark and difficult time, but one punctuated by many moments of light as friends and acquaintances reached out to us. Limited as we were by Covid19 restrictions some of the “normal” grieving rituals were suspended but many found ways to support us. Two such acts stand out for me. The first is our pastor Fr. Jim celebrating mass with Donna and I shortly after Amanda's death—just the three of us in the church—but surely joined by Amanda and the hundreds who loved her and us—the communion of saints. The second is the receipt of a sympathy card from our postal delivery person Vera. Seeing the large volume of cards coming to our door, Vera took the time to discover the reason why by searching out Amanda's obituary and then she gave us a beautiful card. Since that time, I have tried to find ways to be more present to those who are sick, their caregivers, and those grieving the loss of a loved one.

Since May of this year and the discovery of over 200 unmarked graves of children at the Kamloops residential school, Canada has re-engaged with the process of truth and reconciliation. Like many people who are descendants of immigrant settlers, I have struggled to understand how I might act in a spirit of reconciliation. My own family history includes a clear thread showing how I have benefited from the settler mentality. The Rietschlin branch of my ancestors settled in Ohio in 1815 only a few years after the forced removal of the indigenous inhabitants so that the land would be “empty” for European immigrants. As I was growing up on our farm, I recall being excited to find an occasional flint arrowhead, giving no thought to its significance or how we came to be living on that land. Today, I feel committed to engage in dialog to discover how I might love my Indigenous neighbors here in this unceded Algonquin territory that we call Ottawa.

A few weeks ago, on the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, we concluded the liturgical Season of Creation. Today, October 31, the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties begins in Glasgow. Both the Season of Creation and the UN Conference challenge us to take steps to respect the

environment. And what better way to love and honour the Creator than to love and honor God's creation? I remember a day back in the 1970s as I was taking our household trash out to the curb when I suddenly realized that my trash did not simply disappear when picked up by the city workers—that it was all going to remain somewhere—that creating material goods, distributing, and using them, and finally disposal all had environmental impacts. Since that time, I have slowly grown in this awareness. The evidence is all around us that we must make new choices.

Today's gospel passage ends with Jesus saying to the scribe "You are not far from the kingdom of God." Would Jesus say that to me today? To each one of us here? This week, I invite each of us to take a few moments to reflect on that question. How we are living the two greatest commandments. How are we loving the Lord our God? How are we loving and respecting God's creation? How are we loving our neighbor? Then, let us give thanks for the grace that we each receive to grow in love.

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October 31, 2021