

Make Jesus Your Permanent Halloween Costume

Sunday Sermon by the Rev. John Kennedy, October 31, 2021

Happy Halloween.

Around this time of year, when I was six years old, something very, *very* important happened in my little life: A new Batman movie came out... and I got to see it in theaters... even though it was rated PG-13! I had become a Batman fan in the two years or so before this, but not early enough to catch the previous movie which was released when I was about three (a little young for a PG-13 movie anyway). So, this was my first time seeing Batman on the big screen and I thought it was the greatest thing — I saw it two or three times.

Anyway, if this wasn't great enough for my six-year-old self, the movie also came out near Halloween so there were costumes to be had. However, I couldn't limit myself to the Batman costume. I wanted costumes for *all* of the heroes and villains — Batman, Robin, The Riddler, and Two Face. My parents indulged me and got me not one but four costumes (it helps that my birthday is near Halloween). When they arrived, I put them all on, one after the other. With each costume change I felt like a different person — like I was *becoming* that character. It was an electric, thrilling feeling.

This is what I have loved about the holiday over the years: the chance to become someone else for a while, to tap into their energy, to resemble them, to act and feel like them. I imagine this is a lot of the appeal of Halloween for many of us.



Now, as I'm sure many of you know, Halloween is not just a secular day of celebration; its origins, like so many of the traditions of western culture, are in our liturgical calendar. Halloween literally means All Hallows' Eve, or perhaps more to the point: All Saints' Eve, as it is the day before All Saints', which falls on November 1 every year (though we will celebrate it here next Sunday, November 7).

Now, who are all these saints we celebrate on All Saints'? Well, as Anglicans — people of the Middle Way, both Catholic and Reformed — we don't really have one answer to that. A more Protestant or Reformed answer would be that a saint is anyone who is a Christian. A more Catholic answer would be that a saint is someone who has lived an especially holy life and is therefore an exemplar and model for other Christians.

Staying with this second meaning, I suppose one of putting it would be to say that saints are the superheroes of the Church. For 2,000 years, they have inspired people from all walks of life, from all over the planet, to rise above everyday limitations and struggles and become somebody who is *truly* great — great, not according to the standards of the world, but according to Christ, who said that the greatest among you will be least of all and servant of all.

It's thought that anyone can become a saint. How? What's the secret? Well, perhaps it might be helpful — and fitting for a Halloween sermon — to think of a saint simply as someone who has made Jesus their permanent Halloween costume. Scripture actually says as much: Saint Paul writes, "Put on Jesus" or "Clothe yourselves with Christ." Saints are those who have dedicated themselves *completely* to imitating Christ, who is the ultimate superhero.

Now, this doesn't mean wearing white robes and sandals, growing long hair and a beard, and calling disciples to follow you around. Imitating Christ means resembling him from the inside out. First of all, this means being completely dedicated and connected to God, like a lightbulb to electricity. People like this are illuminated by compassion and mercy in all that they do, because, as it is written in the Bible, God *is* Love; and so, to be animated by God is to be animated by love.

It is no coincidence, then, that when Jesus is asked in today's Gospel: "*Which commandment is the first of all?*" He replies, "*The first is... 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.*" As St. Paul writes elsewhere, love is the fulfillment of the law. The measure of saintliness is love.

Saints, or holy people - the word "saint" comes from the Latin "sanctus" which means holy - are some of the most beloved and inspiring people in the world. There is an energy of holiness that is magnetic. Saints radiate it and people are drawn to it.

Saintly people are also some of the most joyful people. They are often, and to a large extent, free of the hang-ups, fixations, vanity, pride, and confusion that often keep us from being at peace. This does not mean they do not suffer, but through it all, they are rooted in Christ, and this sustains them.

And yet, even though saints are among the most beloved and joyful people, relatively few of us seem very interested in becoming a saint ourselves. We seem to prefer to stick with what's familiar, normal, and expected. We seem to prefer to go with the crowd instead of breaking free and following a different way.

What holds us back? Perhaps it is what the existentialist Soren Kierkegaard called our double mindedness; we often can't decide exactly who we want to be. Like me, struggling to pick which costume I wanted from the Batman movie and trying on all four of them, we often go back and forth with what kind of person we want to become; Halloween is not the only time we wear masks (COVID aside!). Every day, we play around with masks, trying on different personality traits, goals, values, trying to imitate popular, successful, or powerful people, looking for just the right persona to fit in or get what we want.

Now, I'm not necessarily putting down ambition or going for what you want in life. "To everything there is a season," as it says in Ecclesiastes. And God reaches us in God's time — you can't *want* to become a saint until you are ready, and when that might be is known to God alone. So, I don't expect you to leave here this morning wanting to immediately dedicate your life to becoming a saint. That said, it is also never too early — or too late — to begin. The most beloved Saint of the 19th century, Saint Therese of Lisieux, was one of the most spiritually powerful people of her time even though she only lived to be 24.

So, in any event, wherever you are now, what I do want to tell you is this:

When you find yourself tired or dizzy from all the costume changes and masks, when that game doesn't seem to be working very well — don't lose hope, and do not despair, because I promise you there is another way. "Clothe yourselves with Christ." Make him your permanent Halloween costume. This is the way of freedom, and this is the way of peace. Amen.