

There are at least a few interpretive lenses through which we may read today's Gospel text. The first of which is Halloween, a Hallmark holiday popularized by the candy industry and driven to extreme terror and gore by Hollywood movies including "Halloween," "Nightmare on Elm Street," "Friday the 13th," and other scary Zombie films. While many cultures honor the dead, we Americans have turned it into a whole industry. Secondly, this is Reformation Sunday as it was on October 31st when in 1517 ML nailed his 95 theses on the door... protesting abuses of the western church, mainly around turning stewardship into a consumer industry by way of what were called "indulgences" to finance the latest building campaign in Rome. And finally, lest you thought I had forgotten, we have elections this Tuesday and a very contentious campaign around the candidates for the local Board of Education.

Our gospel text is also perhaps one of the best known teachings of Jesus... But first, I have to comment on the culture that has dominated Halloween. I call it "Zombie Culture." It's a culture increasingly fixated on violence and death. The first Zombie movie was released in 1938, but it was in 1968 when Night of the Living Dead was first shown, and since then countless movies and TV series have emerged. It's all literally about the walking dead.

I was intrigued by an op ed in the Times by Frank Bruni this week entitled, "Why the Popularity of 'Squid Game' Terrifies Me."¹ That caught my attention and so I've started watching Squid Game. As Bruni reports, it's the most successful Netflix debut ever, apparently a big hit among teenagers. I surveyed the HS team yesterday and most of them have seen it. Zombie movies are about dead Zombies getting slaughtered, but Squid Game is about people like you and me being brutally slaughtered as part of a social game. Why are movies and TV series that champion terror, gore and death so wildly popular in our culture, and increasingly among our young?

A friend and PCUSA colleague, Jon Wasson, preached a sermon years back on the Zombie Apocalypse. He was intrigued by the TV series called "The Walking Dead." His analysis is this:

¹ Rank Bruni, "Why the Popularity of 'Squid Game' Terrifies Me" (New York Times, October 21, 2021), accessed online October 29, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/opinion/squid-game-violence.html?searchResultPosition=4>

Threat after threat lurks around every corner for those who are trying to survive... But the zombies are not the only threat. Every day the group of survivors has to wrestle with the question of what it means to truly live under this threat.

Which forces the audience to wrestle with this question: who are the walking dead, really? From the beginning of the show, we all assume that the walking dead are the zombies. They are referred to as “walkers.” It makes sense. But as the show drags on – we begin to wonder if the walking dead might actually refer to those who are not yet zombies. The Walking Dead is a description of people who have no hope – whose best day is just staying alive...but not really living.

We know what this is like: I mean, we don't live under threat of zombies or of becoming zombies (not yet) – but we all know what it's like to be exhausted by living in a world where the signs of sin and death are all around us and in us. Not just physical death... I mean the kind of spiritual death that we see in institutional violence and racism, or in the domination of the ‘other’ for political or economic gain...or much more subtly in our relationships when, out of fear, we are unable to trust one another and so try to control one another. These are all part of the powers of this age that contribute to our spiritual death.

So we live amidst zombie institutions, zombie economies, zombie relationships, zombie marriages, and zombie spiritual lives. We too, like the survivors in The Walking Dead, run the risk of becoming the walking dead, whose best chance is to somehow just survive another day – whose best hope is to stay alive, but not really live.

I think Jon is on to something... The fact is, our culture seems to be roaming around aimlessly, but all the while dead to the increasing disparity and violence of our culture, insensitive to the needs of the poor and political polarization and cancel culture that seems to be taking over the public square. Bruni observes that the Squid Games commentary on class, greed and savagery is much too central to be incidental. That commentary may, be “a thin veneer of pertinence meant to justify the unrelenting carnage.” But it's there, thin or not, along with the carnage. And tens of millions of viewers are riveted.

Whether you agree or not with Zombie culture, as followers of Jesus we are called to reform our culture. We are called to be counter-culture, living into the values and priorities of the reign of God. I think in our gospel text Jesus makes those values and priorities crystal clear.

A scribe asks Jesus, “Which commandment is first of all?” This detail is important. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus was also debating with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees were the three main groups that made up what was called the Sanhedrin, basically the Jewish Supreme Court

of the day.² They were the guardians of the Jewish culture of the day. Jesus was being judged by the ruling religious and political elite. This Scribe who questions Jesus is in a long line of critics who have been arguing with him about his views. So, *Jesus engaged the culture and especially his critics*. He wanted the people of his day to catch the vision of what he called *the Kingdom of God*.

Secondly, there is something unique about this scribe, in that he seems to be attracted to, even sympathetic with Jesus because Mark notes, “seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked” him his question. In other words, Jesus was attractive, even to his critics, because he had thoughtful answers at the ready. Despite constant attacks, Jesus is able to stay on point! Jesus is a leader who knows that “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing!” And for Jesus, the main thing is love.

“‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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 you’re your neighbor as yourself.’” The first answer Jesus gives of course begins with the *Shema*, the most famous verse in the whole of Hebrew Scriptures (Deuteronomy 6:4). It is recited morning and evening by the Orthodox and is part of many corporate prayers...

Obviously the first command is that there is only one God, and we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have. This is why we talk about stewardship in the church. We are to live our lives cognizant that there are many other gods and idols fishing for our faithfulness and lobbying for our loyalty, but there is only one God, and our love for this God is the source of life for us whether emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, or physically. *All* is repeated four times here for a reason. Our temptation is to compartmentalize our faith into being relevant in certain areas of life. Jesus asserts that God desires our love and commitment completely, not in just fragments or fractions of life...

The paradox is that we need to listen to different perspectives to learn who God really is, and what it means to love God and our neighbors with all that we are... It’s interesting to me that Jesus put himself out there in a diverse crowd, many of whom were critical of his views. Jesus positioned himself as a rabbi who listened to various viewpoints, but was ready to give a brilliantly unique summary of his own ethical vision.

On this All Saints Sunday and on the eve of important elections when partisan rhetoric will be shrill, I want to remind you that the way of faith always

² James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 254.

seeks a diversity of viewpoints and a broader base for community. This is essential to authentic Christian community!

Eli Pariser gave a *Ted Talk* a while back.³ He describes how search engines like *Google* and *facebook* are constantly gathering information about our choices and preferences, and here's what you need to pay attention to: *they are preselecting information that they think you will want to know*. In other words, there's no such thing as an objective search on the web anymore. These are basically powerful *marketing tools* which use algorithms to personalize your own little internet universe according to your likes and dislikes! Think about that... The irony is that what had the potential to expand our world view in fact is now shrinking our world view, and indeed feeding our own narcissistic tendencies!

But here's the scary possibility: Is that what we've been doing all along in the Christian community? Do we only seek out people who look like us or think like us or have the same religious preferences like us? Is that how we build our communities? I would like to suggest that Jesus calls us - in this well-known "love God and love your neighbor" summary - away from our own spirituality bubbles and into the expansive Kingdom community which connects us with all the saints, women and men, young and old, red and yellow black and white, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, straight and gay, Republican and Democrat, liberals and conservatives around the world; not because they are like us, but because they uniquely reflect the *imago dei*, the image of God! And if we're going to love *God* with all that we are and have, we're going to have to learn to love those neighbors who are very different from us!

Jesus' commandment to love God and one another is a commandment concerning true worship! Loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves: *This* is worship that is pleasing to God. And worship does not always look like a well-choreographed ritual, but sometimes more like carrying a cross. What we do here today helps us to remember what God has done for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And in remembering, we are drawn into an attitude of humble response, an openness to obey and show the same kind of sacrificial love.

There's a story of Mother Teresa when in 1982 she visited Lebanon during the Civil War. Richard Attenborough made a film about her and captures a powerful scene.⁴ Mother Teresa is standing with some U.N. peace-keeping forces and the bombs are falling all around a school in Beirut filled with children. She said we must go to get them right now. The commander looked at Teresa and said but there are bombs dropping all around the school and we can't go. And she said,

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8ofWfx525s>, referenced November 3, 2012.

⁴ http://www.amazon.com/Mother-Teresa-Narration-Richard-Attenborough/dp/B000WOYRUI/ref=pd_sim_sbs_mov_1.

“But we must go get them.” And he argued, “But there are bombs dropping.” And she said, “Yes, that’s why we need to go and get them out of there now!” You see, Teresa saw the children’s utter vulnerability and was willing to love them even more than herself. She understood that loving someone else implicitly means denying yourself; risking your own self, your own safety, your own security for another...

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "The gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And a man will worship something - have no doubt about that either. He may think that his tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of his heart - but it will out. That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming..."

Friends, though we may live in a culture that glorifies death and violence, let’s not become zombies! On this holiday of trick or treats, consider the priorities, the choices and investments to which you are giving yourself? If you would follow Jesus, remember how God chose you, and loves you. Commit yourself again to daily worship, obeying Jesus’ call to put God first in your life, and loving all those God has made, however different they may be from you.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.