

“A Season of Soul Cakes” St. Mark’s Fincastle Stephen R. Stanley



It is a blessing to be with our St. Mark’s family and Fincastle community again, both online and here in this sanctuary and also thanks to Geigers for inviting us to last Friday’s Founders Day Dinner. Noting that St., Mark’s Octoberfest is next Sunday, I would declare that “October is my favorite color!” I love what the Psalmist today says about this Autumn season:

“You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. “You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.”

The Biblical images of turning seasons, abundant rain, flocks, growth and harvest is closely related to what Appalachian people have seen for centuries, as autumn signs and prophecies, for our souls, offering both promises and warnings from God. There are three seasonal “H” words, which are signs to contemplate today, in the HAUNTING, HARVESTING AND HALLOWING of October light, which mean more for Christian souls than just another HALLOWEEN. First is the HAUNTING time of remembering times of loss and letting go and of old memories to which we cling, like autumn leaves, in the passing of the seasons of our lives. In the world, we’re not only haunted by children dressed as ghoulies and ghosties, but the real fear of ghastly threats of worldwide recession, political upheavals, environmental crisis and even apocalyptic war. For me, it is also the haunting personal memory of October 2013, nine years ago last Monday. While I was serving as your priest, as the season changed, my beloved mother died of a sudden stroke, on the 17th of October. The falling leaves of October that year and since, remind me of my devastation at my Mom’s sudden parting. And yet, and my long walks among the hauntingly beautiful autumn leaves in the mountains Mom loved., offered me tremendous comfort in the depths of my grief. As I enter pass through another autumn, of my 73rd year, I am aware that seasons offer us great wisdom when we listen to their invitations and questions, like “How do I bless God, in the changing seasons of my life?” A great poet of Autumn, Macrina Wiederkehr, urges us to “Listen to the wisdom of autumn,” at this time:

*Autumn is slipping through summer's branches,
and I am listening.
I am listening to the dying
flowing forth from autumn's being.
I am listening to the life
hidden in the dying.
I am listening.*

Can we yet listen to the life hidden in and beyond the deaths, found in the autumn presence of all saints and souls that are hallowed in our lives and in this place and in the world? Can the communion of saints be more than just those who have died? What is hidden beneath and beyond the loss? Can it be those who still live on in God and also in us, as more than just memories? Is it not true that the flaming glory of October trees, began as seeds hidden and buried in the Earth?

Next, comes the time of HARVESTING, which used to be a literal experience of “bringing in the sheaves.” In ancient pre-Christian times, in the ancient Celtic lands, the season we celebrate as Halloween, was the season called “Samhein” pronounced “Sam-Ween” which, in Gaelic means “end of summer harvesttime”). It was a season for harvesting and baking what was called in Gaelic “Soul Cakes.” (show soul cake) The cakes, marked with a Cross, were simply referred to as “souls.” (To seek them was to go “A-soulin”) Soul cakes were given out to visiting children and the poor, going from door to door during the during the days of All Saints and All Souls, given in the fading autumn light. It was an annual season called “soulingtide.” It was a time for baking, singing and saying [prayers](#) “for the souls of the givers and their friends.” This ancient antecedent of Halloween was immortalized in ancient verses, by Peter, Paul & Mary in their A’Soulin’ Soul-Cake song. The hauntingly beautiful chorus goes:

*“A soul cake, a soul cake, please, good missus a soul cake
An apple, a pear, a plum, a cherry
Any good thing to make us all merry
One for Peter, two for Paul, three for Him who made us all.”*

A-Soulin’ also sung at Christmastime, went like this from Peter, Paul, & Mary: Listen to a bit of their “Soul Cake Song:” “<https://youtu.be/8guGx69jYH4> And so, we listen to ancient chorus of harvesters, as our modern poet Macrina, echoes again her own harvesttime refrain:

*I am listening to happy harvest cries, to hearts overflowing with thanksgiving,
to tables laden with gifts from the earth to baskets overflowing with fruit,
I am listening to the bountiful gift of autumn.
I am listening.*

This is a season to ask: “*Are we harvesting God’s Providence for a broken world or just harvesting the scary stories of our life and times?*” If it’s in Providence we gather, we can move on to HALLOWING, my third October Gospel theme. In our Gospel today, Luke gives us two very different sinners, who come to the temple, representing the “quick,” that is the one who lives well, and the “dead” the outcast, representing those who are lost forever. “The “quick” one, the one who is quick to judge and quick to hallow his own successful self, is a prominent Pharisee. Every one can see his flowing robes and upright bearing. His swagger of righteous indignation at the lower classes, the inferior and the unclean races, who have no right to call at, much less enter God’s door. Ones like this despicable Tax Collector, who dares to pray to the God of Israel, Have mercy on me...” . Now, Jesus audience, also quick to judge, may have already decided, “He is the dead among us, an unhallowed sinner.” This sinner is outside the covenant, outside the laws of Holiness, outside the love of both God and man.” The Pharisee looks down on this sinner’s humble prayer, as a Seinfeld Cake Nazi, who would say, “No soul cake for you!”

But WAIT! Jesus, who is God’s Providence, robed in human poverty and humility, begs to differ. For, in Luke’s Gospel we are given the Lord’s October Surprise! Rabbi Jesus’ question is, “Which of these two will get the “hallowing” Soul Cake blessing from God today? Who will get instead, a burned-out crust of judgment in this temple today?” Who will be justified? Which one of “them,” which one of “us?” We think we know. But then Jesus who comes to judge the “quick and the dead” gives us a despised Roman tax collector, who falls down on the temple floor in prayer, like a fallen leaf, on the autumn forest floor. Could this have been His own disciple, Matthew the Tax Man, and Gospel Man, that Jesus references here? Who will get the trick and who the treat on this day? Who gets more than an apple, a pear, a plum or a cherry? Who will come away merry, from the soul pantry of God’s abundant righteousness, not just their own? The great German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, “*God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people*

as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.” Likewise, today’s psalmist must remind us again, “He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan, or the widow when she pours out her complaint.” So, comes the soulin’ time in the Kingdom of God, when the Holy Spirit transforms trees and communities. God’s Soul Cake is not given as tricks, or treats, given by this world. Rather, we are meant to be safely gathered in, by God’s Word and His spirit and His sacrament of holy “soul cake” that we receive from His altar today.

So, what do we take away in this cornucopia of October imagery? It is that the Kingdom of God bends towards our brokenness, as it did for the tax collector and for Paul, in his words to Timothy today: “But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and all the Gentiles might hear it. So, I was rescued from the lion’s mouth.” As seasons change, may God turn us from fretful to fruitful souls, as we too, bend toward human need, as the autumn poet concludes:

*I am listening to a call for inner growth, to my need to let go of material possessions,
to my need to reach out for invisible gifts.*

I am listening to a call for transformation.

I am listening.

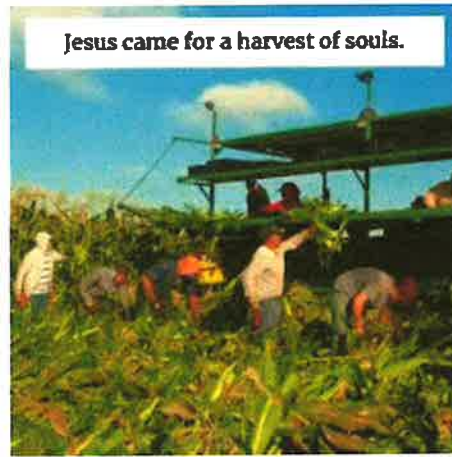
I am listening to the death of old ways.

I am listening to the life force turning inward.

I am listening to the renewal of the earth.

I am listening.

May we listen for God’s renewal of the Earth and of our souls, in our present times. In our soulin’ times, may we listen and seek the unseen gifts, the turnings and the transformations and renewals of the One who made us all. May we be forgiven, gathered and restored here, in seeking the soul pantry of God’s harvest home, and all the more, in Christ’s abundant harvest of saints and souls, forevermore. AMEN



Listening to Autumn, link: <https://www.annsplace.org/new-page-1>