

All Hallows

Rev. Peggy Meeker, 10/29/17

Note: Five “ghosts” (/saints) from our heritage visited during this service. The first ghost, the Rev. **George Washington Montgomery**, who was the first minister of this congregation in 1846, lit the chalice.

Reading: The ghost of the Rev. **John Winthrop Brigham**, minister here in the late 1960s and early 70s, read a selection from his “Still Sounds the Buoy from the Sea: A Selection of Prose and Poetry” [1985, p. 77]

Two members of the “youth revolution” arrived at the church office a few weeks ago. They were Jewish, they said. Was it possible for me to perform a marriage service for them? We talked. They were from New York. “Why not get married at home?” “Oh,” each said, “Our parents would make a great party of it. We want a ‘pure’ marriage service.”

We talked more. They would like a wedding in the park. I agreed to consider it, then asked, “But if it should rain, would you want an alternative in our lounge, perhaps?” It was a good idea, they thought. So we looked at the ... lounge. Then they asked if they might see the church sanctuary. “Well,” I said, “it’s full of Christian symbols—crosses hither and yon, quotations from the New Testament, chaste dancing girls high at each corner speaking for mercy, love, charity and peace.” They wanted to see it. So we did. Neither spoke for a moment, just looked at each other. One nodded and the other nodded. “Could we have the wedding here?” the young man asked. “Rather than the park?” I asked, “rain or shine?” “Yes,” they both replied, “this is the loveliest place of all.”

So it was. They came for their wedding day, guitar player and poet accompanying, and were married in as pure a ceremony as may be imagined. It is such an event that brings sacredness to a place.

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Perhaps you are familiar with the figure of Kokopelli. Or perhaps you heard me talk about Kokopelli a few years back. He’s the little flute player found in rock art throughout the American Southwest, often humpbacked, and these days his image dances on ceramics, t-shirts, and jewelry. He is sometimes referred to as the god of the harvest. His hump is a sack of seeds, or a bag of gifts, from which he scatters good as he travels. He represents the spirit of music, and

his flute playing warms the earth, melting the winter snow and bringing clouds and rain to ensure good crops. He is also a trickster, a mischievous, whimsical, inspiring little figure with a passion for life that brings out the good in everything and everyone. [flute]

The only problem is that some of what I just said is not true. Kokopelli *is* a trickster, and a trickster is many things, but one thing a trickster is not is pure good. His image has been cleaned up. Tricksters have a playful freedom because they do not deny their appetites. They make trouble for everyone, including themselves. They break rules, get dirty, and lie and cheat and steal. They are wanderers, like ghosts, and as they pass through they bring disruption and chaos. And in the process, or in the end, they often bring creativity, new possibilities, new life. Kokopelli may have wandered around scattering seeds from his hump, but he also scattered semen from another part of his body, which was apparently quite remarkable. He is a fertility god. Over the hundreds of years that he has traveled among various Native American cultures, he has taken on many personalities: Casanova, rainmaker, storyteller, and so on. He has not always been a flute player. He had an extended nose that may have had its origins in some kind of insect or bird. Perhaps the nose became a flute over the years. The flute can certainly be seductive, so it fits him. At any rate, Kokopelli is a charmer and a disrupter and a change-maker, and so he brings new life. [flute]

Another famous trickster was the Greek god Hermes. Hermes was the son of Zeus, the main god, but Hermes was illegitimate. On the day of his birth, Hermes invented a beautiful musical instrument, the lyre. Then, seeing that he and his mother were not living as the other gods, eating the best meats, for example, and that they were kept out of sight, like second-class citizens, he went out and stole the cattle that belonged to Apollo, god of light and intellect. Apollo and Hermes argued, with Hermes claiming total innocence, and they took their dispute to Zeus. In the end, Hermes won his place among the gods because he played his lyre and because Zeus was delighted with his brazen, scheming youngest son.

Hermes changed the order of things, the pantheon of the gods. He was an outsider who believed that he belonged on the inside, and he got there. His theft of the cattle was not really a theft, because in the end he was made *god* of the cattle and of all flocks. In fact, the real theft was the withholding of his rightful place, forcing him to win it by cunning, or by whatever means were at his disposal [Hyde, L., *Trickster Makes This World*, North Point Press, 1998]. That's the way it is when people are marginalized, denied their rightful place in the order of things—they sometimes take what they know should be theirs when it is not freely given by society. Frederick Douglas was a trickster in this model. He stole his ability to read, which should never have been denied him. His theft changed everything for him, and by the end of his life he had changed things for countless others. **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** would be another example. She ... [ghost interrupts]. As I was saying, Elizabeth Cady Stanton grabbed hold of the right to be a full human being, her rightful place in the world, and she helped many other women to do the same.

Another trickster is Loki, from the mythology of Northern Europe. Loki belonged to both the race of gods and the race of giants, and perhaps because he wasn't totally at home in either world ... [ghost of **Beatrix Potter** interrupts]. And yes, Peter Rabbit is a trickster.

Where was I? OK: In the Hebrew scriptures, there's the patriarch Jacob. He jockeyed for position in life from the time he is in his mother's womb, grabbing his twin brother Esau's heel in an attempt to be the firstborn. He was a trickster and he became the father of Israel, of all the Jewish people. Just as Zeus favored Hermes, so the god Yahweh favored Jacob, as if Jacob's wishes had been the plan all along.

In the Christian New Testament, Jesus was a trickster: a disrupter of religious and social norms. Is Jesus in the house? No? Jesus, as he is portrayed in the gospels, wasn't at all worried about social norms or about those in power, and he repeatedly escaped the traps set for him by the religious authorities of the day.

Coyote and raven in Native American mythology are tricksters; Anansi in Africa; monkey in China; even Odysseus, with his 10-year-long return from the Trojan War, who is praised more for his wiles than his virtue. And who are today's tricksters? Anyone who breaks things open, who mixes things up. Sometimes they do it because they have a new vision. They take the givens of life and form them into new designs. Sometimes they do it just to cause mischief, and let the chips fall where they may, and new things come. Sometimes they do it because they see something they are want. Almost always, they bring change and growth and new life. As all of our special visitors today brought change and growth and new life.

One last trickster figure with which we're all familiar is the Jack O'Lantern. As legend has it, Jack was an Irish farmer, or maybe a blacksmith. Somehow he ran into the Devil, who was ready to escort him to Hell. In some versions of the story, it happened in a pub on Halloween. Jack offered his soul to the Devil in exchange for one last drink. The Devil changed himself into a sixpence in order to pay the bartender, but Jack put the coin in his pocket, where he also happened to be carrying a silver cross, which prevented the Devil from reverting back to his true form. Thus Jack tricked the Devil, and obtained a promise that he would never have to go to Hell. Years later, when Jack's life finally came to an end, he found that he was unable to enter Heaven because of his tricking and drinking ways, and because of his bargain he could not enter Hell either, so he was forced to wander forever, with nowhere to rest. The Devil granted Jack a lantern so that he could at least see his way, and so today we have the Jack O'Lantern, though the original one would have been carved from a turnip and lighted with an ember from Hell.

The Christian All Saints' Day—All Hallows—was originally celebrated in the springtime, but about 1200 years ago Pope Gregory IV moved it to November 1st, to the pagan festival of Samhain. The night before, All Hallows' Eve, was the night on which the veil between the world of the living and the otherworld was thinnest, the night on which spirits walk the earth. Thus we have All Hallows Even, or Halloween, when we light jack o'lanterns to ward off evil spirits, and we wear

disguises to blend in with the spirits, so as not be detected, although today we've honored the spirits' continuing relationship with us. All Saints Day and All Souls Day used to be religious holy days, but our culture is in a time when the gods are changing again, and we don't yet know what they're becoming. Maybe Jack of the Lantern wanders with us, lighting the way to where we don't yet know.

The trickster reminds us to look at things with fresh eyes, with the perspective of someone on the margins, or someone traveling through, like a ghost. Tricksters remind us to be willing to open things up, to allow new light to be shed. And they remind us of the importance of our hungers, our desires. The trickster steals fire because the trickster needs warmth, and new life comes. The trickster plays because the trickster is hungry for something—something that may be destined to change everything. The ghosts who have visited us today leave us a legacy. It's up to us to carry on. What are you hungry for? What do you desire? [flute]

Benediction given by **Henry David Thoreau**