

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Consequence Before Relevance

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning!

Back in the garish days of neon legwarmers, the Sony Walkman, and Ferris Bueller, it was the home telephone that served as the teenager's connection to the outside world. In the absence of text messaging and social media, one connected with friends by pressing these ancient, corded devices to an ear, alternately listening and speaking to a neighborhood interlocuter, all whilst absent-mindedly twirling its ringlet cable and ignoring parental pronouncements, to "Come downstairs for dinner!" ... "Do your homework! ... "Let your sister have a turn!"

As with contemporary iPhones and the such, the device itself was an expression of status and location in these social exchanges: there was the squatty, square-bottomed AT&T standard issue (weighed like a hundred pounds), leased from the phone company and common to grandmotherly living rooms and business offices; there was the plastic, wall-secured model, common to active kitchens and equally commonly ripped from its wallpapered, sheetrock mount when one stretched its cord as taught as possible to find a more discrete space to discuss weekend plans; and then there were the novelty phones, selected from the dog-eared pages of the J.C. Penny's Christmas catalogue or the shelves of Spencer's Gifts at the mall.

Among this more ornamental lot, none was more ubiquitous than the Tyco-branded Garfield phone. Molded plastic in the shape of the lasagna-loving, cartoon cat, Garfield's sleepy eyes would remain shut while the receiver was in its cradle and would open widely when the owner lifted the receiver either to receive or make a call. While I remember these adolescent baubles on the bedside tables of my friends, last month The New York Timesⁱ reported that these particular phones have been washing onto beaches along the western coast of France since the peak season of their popularity ... orange-plastic eyelids and black-rubber pushbuttons ... rectangular receivers and solid-state circuit boards ... for *more than thirty years*, all these Garfield bits and pieces washing ashore along with the starfish and the seashells.

With little less mystery, this morning Jesus appears on the shore along the Sea of Tiberius [to be clear: we're talking Jesus, not Garfield] and, after offering counsel to a familiar group of fisherman, he invites his companions to join him for a Eucharistic breakfast broil.ⁱⁱ Some in the academy dismiss this tale as inauthentic to John, arguing that last week's lesson marks the "true" ending. However, Roman Catholic scholar Sandra Schneiders proposes, "The Fourth Gospel ... is structured as a cosmic drama being acted out in history rather than a historical event with cosmic implications."ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, "regardless of who actually penned [Chapter 21 ... it] is an

integral part of the Gospel in fundamental theological continuity with [what precedes it], and its purpose is to bring the [testimony] to a close by transferring the reader's attention from the experience of the first disciples with the *historical* Jesus, to the experience of the contemporary church with the *glorified* [Christ] ...^{iv}

Let us unpack these ideas.

First, from a starting point in the cosmos, we can let go of the need for strict "historicity" when considering the events of Jesus' life and ministry, and we can focus instead on the broader brushstrokes of John's Christ portrait. Remembering that airy poetry of John's first chapter – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ..."^v – we may imagine what we hear this morning as a cosmic bookend to that prologue, and, loosening the grip of authorship questions, we can focus instead on the *visionary* qualities of the work – studying John as an Impressionist, rather than as a Realist.

From these airier origins, then, Chapter 21 transitions the attention of us readers from the disciples' engagement with the carpenter and teacher of Nazareth, to the Church's experience of the "glorified" Christ, moving us from the *text*, to our *experience*. Rather than as an *historical* record more in the mode of the Jesus narrative which precedes it, today's appointment may be understood as an *archetypal* accounting of the early Church's Divine encounters, encouraging us to recognize the risen Christ's continuing revelation in our own time and place – *this is the force of the lesson*, that we would recognize the risen Christ in our own time and place.

Well, earlier this spring, environmentalists solved the mystery of the Garfield phones: The Times reports, "... a local man recalled a big storm that struck in the ... 1980s[, and, last month, volunteers] ventured into [a] sea cave, normally cut off by the tide and only accessible a few days each year, where they found metal from a [long-lost shipping] container [along with heaps of these] Garfield-shaped phone shells."^{vi}

Reading this news report historically and seeking meaning only in its historicity, the tale loses considerable power. Once we move on from the secret den of pelagic elves laboring in a time-capsuled, marine workshop, we instead cross-reference French weather reports with the dates Tyco manufactured these phones, and, in seeking the story's meaning, we, at best, make an observation about our persistent disregard for the environment – not unimportant, but not all there is to say. Reading the account impressionistically, however, we can discern other lessons in its unusual tale: that the siren of nostalgia takes perch in rocky waters; that all stylishness rusts; and that relationships, not phones, endure and, with such cosmic truths, we can imagine bits of these cartoon devices washing even upon the scene in John's Gospel: in the fishermen's nets, around the charcoal fire, and at Jesus' feet.

Like teenagers with telephones, we in the Church have often responded to our experience of Resurrection by pursuing *relevance*, rather than *consequence* ... *relevance*, rather than *consequence*. And when we esteem “relevance” as a value, we engage the culture *on the culture’s terms*, shaking hands on faddish, quid pro quo transactions that, ultimately, cost us credibility and reinforce our marginalization.

Sticking with the 1980s illustrations, I remember vividly one of my high-school classmates attempting to save my soul with an invitation to a Friday-night church service, which turned out to be a heavy-metal-for-Jesus, “Christian Rock” concert. The event borrowed all the glam and guitars of 1980s hair bands before tacking an altar call on the end of the set ... I was horrified, both as a Christian and as a heavy-metal fan. No, John 21 encourages us to pursue *consequence*: “Feed my lambs ... Tend my sheep,” the risen Christ commends.^{vii}

Thanks be to God and thanks be to you, Trinity Church *does* seek consequence, perhaps most powerfully in the work of the Trinity Boston Foundation. At a time when I had not considered leaving my Austin cure, the Foundation’s ministry first prompted me to receive a phone call with the Search Committee Co-Chairs and to learn more about this faraway parish. In the many months since, I have been inspired to learn how the work of TBF – creative and strategic, practical and structural – seeks to *transform* the culture in the image of the Gospel, rather than consenting to transactions that risk the opposite result. *This* – for us oxbow lakes of the American mainstream – this is how Jesus calls us to respond to our prophetic position: as an *advantage*, and *not* as a liability.

Though in a parish as venerable as Trinity, an undertaking as relatively recent as the Foundation might seem an appendage to a longer-established identity, be assured that I view TBF’s work as *essential* to who we are and who God is calling us to become – a necessary and inevitable expression of our common prayers and praises. Please know, too, that as enthusiastically as I seek to join in that consequential ministry, so, too, do I approach that work humbly, for I have so much to learn: from you, from the Foundation leadership, and from the people and organizations we serve. Seeking reconciliation and justice in that generous spirit, I hope that you will join me running with Sole Train, serving at the McCormack, and partnering with TEEP, for on those servant shores – in moments we cannot, yet, imagine – we will encounter the glorified Christ.

Indeed: Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

ⁱ Karasz, Palko. “[Why Do Garfield Phones Keep Washing Upon This Beach?](#)” *The New York Times*. March 29, 2019. This is such a weird story!

ⁱⁱ John 21:13.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schneiders, Sandra M. “The Lamb of God and the Forgiveness of Sin(s) in the Fourth Gospel.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. January 1, 2011.

^{iv} Schneiders, Sandra M. “John 21:1-19.” *Interpretation*. January 1989.

^v John 1:1.

^{vi} Karasz.

^{vii} John 21:15b,16b.