

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
July 26, 2020
VIII Pentecost, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.ⁱ

I remember his blue jeans. He wore *Rustlers*: the wrong brand, a K-Mart knock-off of Wrangler, which were a notch below Lee, which were below the Levi's I wore, which were all well below the "fashion" brands from Chess King, Dillard's, and Lola Herndon's dress shoppe.ⁱⁱ And his Rustlers did not fit. Built like a brick turned on its side, I am not sure what brand or size would have had him looking like the magazine ads, but he rolled his at the cuffs because they were too long, and cinched them with a belt at his waist because they were too big.

He attached himself to our high-school's personalities with a fealty more usually reserved for Hollywood stars and professional athletes. He interested himself in their accomplishments on the playing fields and courts, in the classroom, and during the weekends. In his deep voice – country even for North Louisiana – he hooked his thumbs into the loops above his front pockets and would tell any half-willing listener about rumors of a football player's purported scouting by a university staff, or a debutant's new car, or a who's-who's academic rank. Despite the absence of any proof – or even when others would have accounted evidence to the contrary – he shared his dispatches with the gladness of *reciprocal* relationships, as though in some other bright corner of campus these classmates were speaking of him with as much energy, interest, and goodwill as he spoke of them.

I saw him in 2004 or 2005 at the Johnny's Pizza in Madison Park, across from where the El Chico's used to be and Fern Avenue turns into Gilbert Drive. Living around the corner in the first house my wife and I bought after seminary, I'd come to pick up my order after a Saturday of working in our yard.

"Morgan Allen!" he called out when I walked through the door.

Though I recall a spark of delight at my memorableness – that satisfaction of being recognized in one's hometown – humility now reminds me that he did have the benefit of my name written on the order. No matter, he was affable as always, asking on me briefly before launching into tales of a particular classmate for whom he had always shown a special shine. As he moved from between the ovens and the register to come out and shake my hand, I began the social calculus of measuring as precisely as possible the minimum length of time that I had to talk to him before I could announce my leaving without causing hurt. Missy and our infant son were waiting for me for supper, and I did not want my pizza to get cold.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.ⁱⁱⁱ

He was born the year before I was, but my senior yearbook indicates Caddo Parish classified him as a sophomore when I graduated. He wears a coat-and-tie in the black-and-white school photo, the only person I can find so dressed. I do not know if the formality speaks of his parents' sensibilities or his, but now – as the father of my own high-school sophomore – I find his picture immediately endearing: the suit says to me he takes pride in himself, and he looks on the edge of a laugh – like at any moment he will break into a good, hard, belly-shaking laugh. And I can remember him laughing like that.

I can also remember him at lunch, his acne not much worse than the rest of ours, but somehow dotting his countenance in maximally unfortunate constellations. He stands in the circle drive connecting the gym's side entrance, the cafeteria, and the small neighborhood of pale-yellow "T-Building" classrooms, looking for someone – anyone – to tell what he heard in the locker room that morning.

I can remember him after school, his R.O.T.C. hat folded into the same fist clenching a haggard backpack. He stands near the parking lot, sweatily asking passers-by for a ride: a ride home ... a ride to the game ... a ride to the dance.

And I can remember him on the practice field, no strand of his fuzzy, brown hair moving individually. He devotedly ferries plastic water bottles to the team practicing in shells (helmets and shoulder pads) in the August heat ... or the spring heat ... always the heat. Water sloshing everywhere and his hands full, he reaches around himself to pull on his belt and keep his britches up as Coach claps and hollers at him to hurry.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.^{iv}

While on pandemic staycation week-before-last week, I was washing away concrete residue after installing the anchor for a driveway basketball goal when my phone buzzed with a link to his obituary. More than only the 2,000 miles from Shreveport, I was a million miles from any thought of him before I read that he had died on July 12. The short announcement recalled that he "was a friend to everyone and a beloved uncle ... He was always willing to help and assist any friends or family with whatever they needed ... He loved sports, especially wrestling and football ... going to the movies, and a nice, cold Coca-Cola."

I glanced up from the death notice to see that sophomore son of mine picturing where the new hoop would stand and stepping off the fifteen feet to the free-throw line. Michael adjusted an invisible jersey and dribbled twice an imaginary ball. He took a breath, bent his knees, ... and sent his best shot spinning into a net not yet there.

I saw, too, my teenaged daughter snapping her bike helmet around a mask her mother made for her. A flowery print on white fabric with pink piping, Missy stitched a bit of floral wire into the bridge to snug it against Ginna's nose, just behind a strip of soft athletic tape she added so that its seams would not rub. Ginna adjusted her sunglasses, sounded the bell on her handlebars, and pedaled off to a combo ride through "Route #3" and "Route #1" of the four approved circuits we had mapped together on Google Earth.

Returning to my phone, his remembrance had one post to its online Guestbook: "I'm going to miss your smiling face!!!" a "Mary" writes. "You were one of the customers I enjoyed seeing come through my line at Albertsons [Supermarket]. You will be truly missed my friend!!!"

*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls;
on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.^v*

I do not know how he died, but his obituary's silence on the subject troubles me. Though I am not active on social media, a fellow schoolmate shared that he had seen "one of his Facebook posts in the past year that [asked,]'repost this if you have a friend with Depression or suicidal thoughts.' Only one person [had given] him a thumbs-up."

Now I can see him in his Rustlers ... in his ROTC uniform ... in his sweet coat-and-tie ... holding a sign with those words – "If you have a friend" ... "If you have a friend *in me*" – the frailties and insecurities the most of us work so hard to hide written on his skin and accented in his voice as he stands there during lunch hour and after school and in the early evening at Johnny's. I dig for my car keys and I look past him, I check my watch ... and I keep walking.

*Jesus asks his friends, "Have you understood all this?"
"Yes," the disciples answer.^{vi}*

Jesus' wisdom sayings... our many and varied lives ... these COVID-19 days – resurrection and crucifixion crashing in all at once, inscrutable and utterly heart-splitting.

30 years ago, shouldering my anxieties was as much as I could carry, was *more* than I could carry. And fifteen years ago – Jesus, *week-before-last* – caring for my family and keeping myself upright to face a world so maddeningly beautiful and painful felt like more than I could manage, feels like more than could be expected of *anyone* to manage.

Even so, Lord, have mercy on me: I could have loved him enough – I could have loved *you* enough – to have delayed my supper and sought to see him ... only for a moment, to *see* him. We could have taken seats across from one another in one of those booths right there near the front counter – not forever, just for a few sips of an ice-cold fountain Coke. We could have caught up a little ... celebrated the complicated blessing of those seasons we had shared ... acknowledged the ones we had traveled apart since then ... even imagined what might be coming next for each of us. We could have, then.

Oh, Lord, we do *not* understand! *I do not understand!*

What about the shrubs that do not grow into trees, those seeds that the sun bleaches and the world turns to dust?

What about the yeast that does not rise, Lord, the lost pearls that no one finds?

What about the treasures still hidden in those fields too inconvenient, too tedious to explore?

What is our responsibility to one another?

Who is responsible for whom?

Where are you in all this?

Lord, in our suffering and our struggle, our loneliness and our confusion, *be with us*. Hold us always in your holy Hope. Pry from us our arrogance and our apathy, and strengthen us to approach this diseased, divided world with your Love ... *with your Love*. Inspire our kindness and join us in bonds of friendship. Remind us of your image impressed upon us – upon *all of us* – and accomplish in our lives your good purpose. Make *us* the Kingdom of Heaven. All this we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord.^{vii}

Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 13:31-32.

ⁱⁱ This is the second sermon in six months with a reference to blue-jean brands. I do not know that that means the Spirit is saying.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 13:33.

^{iv} Matthew 13:44.

^v Matthew 13:45-46.

^{vi} Matthew 13:51.

^{vii} Based on the prayer “For the Human Family,” the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 815.