

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

October 4, 2020

Matthew 21:33-46

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

I speak often of my mentor and friend, the Very Rev. M.L. Agnew, Jr, the retired Dean of Saint Mark's Cathedral in Shreveport, Louisiana, the retired Chaplain of Saint Ann's Episcopal Church in Kennebunkport, Maine. When Missy and I met with him for our pre-marital counseling (a long time ago now), he engaged me in a conversation about discernment, one which resulted in my call to the Cathedral and Cathedral School ... to seminary ... to ordination ... and, ultimately, to here, this parish and this pulpit. In a hundred ways and for a thousand reasons, I would not be at Trinity Church were it not for him.

The fundamentals of M.L.'s leadership – *to work hard*; to learn the names and stories of the people you serve; *to work hard*; to love well even those who show you no love; *to work hard*; to *see* the most vulnerable of every community and seek them out to know and love; *to work hard* – the model of his lived witness continues to shape my life as a person and this ministry I steward as a priest.

M.L. kept in his pocket several old saws that he fit into various occasions and settings. Whether across the desk of his office, or across the table of a local plate-lunch counter, he did not hesitate to share these favored aphorisms. In the 25 years since those days, I fit (at least) one of his adages in my own vest, and I share it often with my children, even as I say it to myself ... hearing the words in M.L.'s Deep South, Mississippi accent: "Morgan, do not give other people permission to determine how you're going to behave." Hear that again (in my own affect):

Do not give other people permission to determine how you're going to behave.

For my teenagers, this counsel often targets "peer pressure," as in, "So-and-so, and so-and-so, and so-and-so, are all going to the mall, *this weekend*. Their parents have given them money: money to go shopping, and money to get their lips, eyebrows, noses, and ears pierced and tattooed. They're even riding *together* in the car – a very small car, without windows that roll down – and no one is making *them* wear masks."ⁱ

This sort of scenario prompts in me the *collective* form of that old saw: "*We don't give other people permission to determine how we're going to behave ... do we? Do we do that? No. No, we don't do that.*" A declaration usually followed by a grunt and some stomping on the one side, and a sip of brown liquid on the other.

So if not by what our friends' parents permit, how do we know how to behave?

This morning's appointment continues the Exodus narrative we have traced since late summer. That story began for us in August, when Pharaoh's daughter pulled the infant Moses out of the river Nile;ⁱⁱ continued with God's call to Moses from the burning bush at Mount Horebⁱⁱⁱ – the first Passover,^{iv} the parting of the Red Sea, ^v God's provision of manna and quail after the Israelites' complaining.^{vi} Then, last week, Moses takes his staff, a symbol of the Israelites' salvation, returns to the same site (spiritually, if not geographically) where he first encountered God and received his vocation, strikes the rock as directed, and water flows from stone, providing for his thirsty companions.

Then, after a war with Esau's descendants and three days of Moses' raucous engagement with God on the mountain, we now pick up the narrative with this morning's appointment, when God announces, "I am the Lord your God" ... *I am the Lord your God.*^{vii} And the Ten Commandments follow:

you shall have no other gods before me;
you shall not make for yourself an idol;
you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord;
[you shall] honor your father and your mother;
[you shall] remember the Sabbath;
you shall not murder;
you shall not commit adultery;
you shall not steal;
you shall not bear false witness;
you shall not covet.^{viii}

See, in response to the Israelites *ad hoc* organization borne of survival's urgencies – escaping from slavery, from hunger, from thirst – God now establishes a new ethos, one that emerges from the creative love and concern of that first declaration, "I am the Lord your God." *Whatever else shall come to pass in seasons soon and long from now, in places near and far away, in situations known and not yet imaginable: I am the Lord your God. I have made you, and I have made you precious. I have chosen you as sign for all people of my love for everything and everyone I have created. Honor my love – and our love for one another! – always.*

As Jesus will soon summarize these Commands and all 613 instructions of the Law: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."^{ix} That is, all these particulars point back to that first declaration. We do not receive the Ten Commandments as a *comprehensive catalogue*. Rather, God delivers the Decalogue as an ethical foundation, the primary expressions – *examples* – of faithful living.

Lord, have mercy this week ... *this year!* Every day seems a fresh exercise in the unprecedented and the heretofore unbelievable. I find myself repeatedly shocked that national events can still shock me, and the felt urgency of every new scenario dares us to grant one another permission to free ourselves of these post-Decalogue constraints, to let loose of our long-established ethical norms – the ethos God established for us – and to return to those earlier, Exodus standards, borne of survival and expressed by entitlement and complaint.

And we legitimize these primal regressions by confessing how ineffective our witness feels when set against adversaries and intentions so powerful and malevolent. We tell ourselves, and we say to one another, “What he has done is such an outrage, that we cannot just lay down and take it! We have to respond with *greater force* to *defend* our righteous ground.” So, when they shout, we scream louder ... When they lie, we justify our own prevarications ... When they slander, we sensationalize ... When they punch, we punch harder and lower and lower and lower.

Well Trinity Church, let us be reminded:

We do not give other people permission to determine how we're going to behave.

We do not give other people permission to determine how we're going to behave!

Do not give this pandemic permission to determine how *you're* going to behave.

Do not allow threats – subtle or spoken – do not allow the threateners permission to determine how you're going to behave.

Do not give these train-wreck politics permission to determine how you're going to behave.

Don't give anything – anyone, anywhere – permission to determine how you're going to behave.

We as the Body of Christ must become the staff of Moses! A sign of God's salvation, strong with fidelity and constancy, forged in mercy and hope, an instrument of God's mission struck against the culture's moral conveniences.

We as the Body of Christ must become the burning bush itself – on fire for justice! ... yet never consumed by rage or self-righteousness.

The God of Jesus Christ has declared, “I am the Lord your God.” And no matter how blaspheming the “wrong,” the wisdom of another old saw works, for two wrongs still do not make a right. And we Christians cannot allow others' ill actions to prompt our own. The cost of such spiritual compromise – the collateral damage of leaving the high road to drive down into the ditch after some cause – is nothing less than our very souls: *ours*, individually ... *ours*, as the Church of God ... *ours*, as the world God has made.

We have a higher calling – our inheritance from the ancient Israelites – that being blessed we would become a blessing. Together – one by one and *all* – God calls us to model a different way. And drawing living water from rock, we will carve this way – the Way of Love! – in the stony hearts of this world.

That God alone would guide us;
I pray in the name
of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

ⁱ In defense of my children, I acknowledge this example as hyperbole. More often than not, my teenagers will offer their own incredulity at their peers' recklessness.

ⁱⁱ Exodus 1:8-2:10, from the Lectionary appointments of August 23, 2020 (Proper 16, on XII Pentecost).

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 3:1-15, from the Lectionary appointments of August 30, 2020 (Proper 17, on XIII Pentecost).

^{iv} Exodus 12:1-14, from the Lectionary appointments of September 6, 2020 (Proper 18, on XIV Pentecost).

^v Exodus 14:19-31, from the Lectionary appointments of September 13, 2020 (Proper 19, on XV Pentecost).

^{vi} Exodus 16:2-15, from the Lectionary appointments of September 20, 2020 (Proper 20, on XVI Pentecost).

^{vii} Exodus 20:1-2. The Proper 21 appointment comprises Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20.

^{viii} Exodus 20:3-17.

^{ix} From Matthew 22:38-39, from Proper 25, appointed for October 25, 2020.