

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

October 18, 2020

I Stewardship, Matthew 22:15-22

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

Within the dark and complicated roils of *his* time, the young Motown superstar born Stevland Hardaway Morris spent an early-winter day alone in New York. He prayed as much as he sang:

*Good morn or evening friends,
here's your friendly announcer.
I have serious news
to pass on to everybody ...*

*It's that
love's in need of love today!ⁱ*

In that year of 1974, Israel agreed to withdraw troops from the Suez Canal and OPEC ended the year-long oil embargo that had quadrupled the price of a crude barrel – yet global economies moved from recession to “stagflation,” pairing high unemployment with swift inflation, collapsing markets and imperiling the world’s most financially vulnerable.ⁱⁱ So, though global leaders achieved a tentative peace, the condition of our *world's* soul remained uncertain.

Also in 1974, Richard Nixon resigned the presidency after years of undemocratic machinations, tax evasion, illegal scheming – yet he did so under the cover of an agreement with his successor, ascending Vice-President Gerald Ford, that Ford would pardon Nixon of his Watergate malfeasance.ⁱⁱⁱ So, though politicians negotiated resolution to a years-long public outrage, the condition of our *nation's* soul remained uncertain.

In 1974, Judge Arthur Garrity ordered Boston to desegregate its schools by busing children from one neighborhood into another – yet the unapologetic racism that prevented the city from abiding a state directive^{iv} from a decade earlier still persisted, portending a fall of scarring trauma, violence, and unrepaired inequities.^v So, though courts decided a question of human dignity, the condition of our *cities'* soul remained uncertain.^{vi}

And in December of 1974, Stevie Wonder brought into his hotel room a portable, Fender-branded Rhodes electric piano^{vii} that he played for inspiration, and a Nakamichi tape deck that he used to record ideas. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Wonder recalls, “It was so cold outside ...”^{viii}

Wonder's brief, first marriage^{ix} had ended some eighteen months before, and only six months later, Wonder barely survived a terrible automobile accident. "According to reports, he was riding in the front passenger seat of a rental car in [North Carolina] when it struck the back of a flatbed truck used to deliver lumber."^x The collision knocked a sleeping Wonder unconscious, a coma that would persist for five days, followed by a two-week stay in a Winston-Salem hospital. Severe headaches would continue, and on that cold, winter evening in New York, he would have been able to feel the raised scar that crash left on his forehead.

So with souls uncertain – collectively and personally, *uncertain* – twenty-four-year-old Stevie Wonder began to play, praying as much as singing:

*The force of evil
plans to make you its possession.
And it will,
if we let it,
destroy everybody.*

*We all must take
precautionary measures
if love – and please –
[if love] you treasure,
then you will hear me when I say,*

*Oh, that,
'Love's in need of Love today.'^{xi}*

Stevie Wonder explains that his songs "emerge from the process of listening ... [and] I always start from a feeling of profound gratitude – 'Only by the grace of God am I here' – and [I] write from there. I think most songwriters are inspired by an inner voice and spirit. *God gave me* this gift, and [the song that emerged that night – 'Love's In Need of Love Today' –] was a message I was supposed to deliver."^{xii}

Of his song's remarkable tuning to that moment in 1974, Wonder continues, "The concept I had in mind was that for love to be effective, it has to be fed. Love itself is hollow ... I was playing chords and humming along, adding lyrics and phrases as I heard the music evolve. [As with Love itself,] I wanted to *feel* the song and *move* with the music, rather than try to control it ...

"I decided to record in a ... slightly higher key [than I had written the song, one that] was better for my voice and felt better *spiritually* ... Almost immediately the song felt significant, so [rather] than start with an instrumental, I developed a [gospel harmony] to set the song's tone ... I knew my harmonized voices had to be clear, but that my lead vocal had to be heard above the rest, not tucked in the back. The song was going to be a sermon, telling people that love was in need of love."^{xiii}

The song was going to be a sermon, telling people that love was in need of love.

Today at Trinity Church we begin our annual Stewardship campaign, and, people of God, hear me when I tell you, love's in need of love *today*. For in 2020 as in 1974 – as in 1920 and 1874, as in 1820 and 1774, on, and on, and on – our souls' condition, *as always*, remains uncertain: *globally* uncertain^{xiv} ... *nationally* uncertain^{xv} ... *locally* uncertain^{xvi} ... within our parish, inside our homes, and in our very hearts: fragile, uneasy, *uncertain*. Lord, have mercy, preach it again, Mr. Wonder – for *love's in need of love today*.

Now, during our Stewardship season we seek two important ends: one, support for our congregation's ministry for the coming year; and two, the nurture of one another as joyful partners in God's restorative mission. These goals are, on the one hand, communal and practical – what, together, we can afford to do; and, on the other, personal and spiritual – what God asks of us as individuals. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus sets a high standard for both.

With his familiar quip, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's”^{xvii} – or, as in the King James, “Render unto Caesar”^{xviii} – Jesus *mocks* the image on the coin, *mocks* the inscription declaring the emperor “son of god,” and dares the Pharisees consider to whom they pay their allegiance and fidelity. Now recognize, Jesus does not first warn against giving to the emperor what is God's – *rather, Jesus warns the Pharisees against giving to God what is the emperor's*.

All of Jesus' life and ministry declares that *every good is God's creation*, and every good *remains God's possession* – all that is good is *God's good* and *is God's already*. Thereby, Jesus understands that the Pharisees' financial Stewardship is not about the quality and character of *God's* life – not about *God's* soul – but about the quality and character of *their* lives – about the condition of *their* souls. Jesus urges the religious leaders:

Do not fill my Temple with Caesar's ways of war and worry, of mistrust and malfeasance, of hate and hurt. You've got to take “precautionary measures,” and “if it's love you treasure,” then fill the Church with your grace and peace and mercy, for it is love in need of love today.

In address of our collective Stewardship, then, let us start like Jesus and Stevland, from that place of deep gratitude for all that God has blessed us as Trinity Church. Despite the bone-cracking difficulty of this year since March 13 – the loss of physical community and the crush of public injustice ... the unremitting anxiety and the unrelenting unknown – here we are as we can be, having shared meaningful worship, programs, and connection during these last seven months, all in ways we could not have imagined before necessity commanded both our creativity and our openness to new devotions.

Now, as we begin to budget for 2021, we have zeroed January-August expected revenues from our Visitor Services and tourism ministries; from our concerts; and from our non-pledge plate offerings. Importantly, this decision *does not mean* we have conceded all hopes of in-person ministry between now and September 1 of next year. Of course not! Your staff, your Vestry, and your ministry leaders understand *and share* the aching desire to be together and to receive Communion, to serve our city *feet on the street* and to worship as one Body in our sacred space.

Those visions remain our goals as they are yours, and there is not one day I awake to a hope for anything less – that *all of us* are not faithfully laboring for anything less.^{xix} And if the condition of the world shifts in ways that will allow us to gather safely with our doors open to all, then we will come together with leaps and shouts for joy! Yet, until then, we believe budgeting this timeline appropriately and necessarily mitigates our risk of encountering a crisis moment in 2021 when we must suddenly and significantly reduce expenses.

This same spirit and commitment to live within our means has served us well in 2020. As many will recall, a dozen of our staff members retired, moved from Boston, or moved to new positions outside our parish from March of 2019 to March of this year. As I oriented myself to Trinity’s operational structure and assessed our needs, we made a strategic decision not to rehire these posts immediately – and thanks be to God we did not, for that conservatism has allowed us to sustain our ministries by keeping our staff as whole as possible during the pandemic.

That is the good news – and be clear that it is, *good*. Yet here is the rub: while we have wisely and necessarily kept costs low this year, we do not currently have the budget required to meet the demands of a post-COVID normal. Recall that this pandemic is not a *blizzard* or a *winter*, but an *ice age*, a crucible forging us into something altogether new, and a vaccine will not inaugurate a swift return to a former way of life – not for us, not for anyone. The world’s healing from this experience will be gradual, and slow, and will command a *new*, new-way-of-being – one expecting the continuance of our “From Home” ministries, even as we begin to gather in person more often. Therefore, if we are to deliver the message God has called us to deliver – if we are to sing the song God has called us to sing – then expansion of our staff and the increase of our ministry allocations will be required. Having fewer sources of revenue only embosses the urgency and importance of our shared Stewardship.

Which brings us back to Stevie Wonder’s sermon and Jesus’ admonition about our *personal* Stewardship – about our pledges. Remember, our shared, gospel harmonies set our collective tone, but we can’t tuck ourselves in the back or hide under that greater song. Again, hear the Motown preacher: “... for love to be effective, it has to be fed ...” And hear the Nazarene teacher: “Give to the emperor what is the emperor’s, and give to God what is God’s.”

Facing the challenges of our moment, we must resist temptations to fill God’s Church with this pandemic’s anxieties, our politics’ rancor, and our personal frustrations, grievances, and disappointments. Instead, we must fill Trinity Church *with our love*. God commissioned the Body of Christ in Love and for Love, and *that* Love stands in need of your *love* today – **Trinity Church needs your love!**

During the pandemic, many have asked, “How can I help? What can I do to make a difference? How can I support Trinity Church?” As we ready for next year, I say to you – candidly and clearly – fulfill your 2020 pledge and make the best 2021 commitment that you can. With the world’s shift on its axis, not everyone will be able to give what they want to give, or even what they gave last year. But some can. And some can give more. And those of us who can, should – not out of guilt, but by what our love requires and what God’s Love empowers.

Let us take heart that for nearly 300 years, Trinity Church has endured through wars and fires ... blizzards and pandemics ... economic recessions, depressions, and disasters – yet let us also realize that Trinity has endured not by accident or providence alone: even this Love is hollow until we fill it. This parish with which God has blessed us exists because people like you and I and all of us, gave their great love in times of great need. With their souls’ condition uncertain, they gave their loving best, and now – with our own uncertainties, darkneses, and complexities roiling – we must do the same.

The evangelist sings the final, full chorus:

*Hate’s going round
breaking many hearts.
Stop it – please! –
before it’s gone too far ...*

*Don’t delay [and]
send yours in right away.
Love’s in need of love today.*

*[Oh] Don’t delay,
send yours in right away
[For] Love’s in need of love today.^{xx}*

In the name of God,
Amen.

ⁱ Wonder, Stevie. “[Love’s In Need Of Love Today](#),” *Songs In The Key Of Life*, Tamla Records (Motown), 1976. [Wonder made news this week \(of October 12\)](#) with the release of two new songs, the announcement of a new album, and word that the artist has decided to leave Motown Records after nearly 60 years.

ⁱⁱ Mackintosh, James. “[Inflation is Already Here – For the Stuff You Actually Want to Buy](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2020. Of our 2020 situation, Mackintosh observes that while the unevenness of 2020 inflation (eg, travel-related prices are down as much as 25%, while food and “from-home” items are up as much as 10%) keeps the combined, yearly inflationary rate down, consumers already feel the affects of our pandemic economy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Holson, Laura M. “[No One Could Believe It’: When Ford Pardoned Nixon Four Decades Ago](#),” *New York Times*, September 8, 2018. Holson writes: “[Historians theorize that] Mr. Nixon had picked Mr. Ford as his vice president because a pardon was assured. (His previous vice president, Spiro Agnew, admitted to tax evasion and resigned in 1973.) ‘I came away with the impression it was a done deal,’” said [presidential historian, Douglas] Brinkley, who has read much of the correspondence between Mr. Ford and Mr. Nixon.”

^{iv} The Massachusetts “Racial Imbalance Act” (1965).

^v Gellerman, Bruce. “[How The Boston Busing Decision Still Affects City Schools 40 Years Later](#),” *WBUR News*, June 20, 2014. Gellerman quotes Jim Vrabel, author of *A People’s History of the New Boston* (2014), who observes: “The last 40 years we’ve been pursuing a mathematical solution to desegregate Boston schools, instead of an educational solution to improve them.”

^{vi} These “In 1974” paragraphs could have continued for much too long. Could the sermon have borne one more, I would have referenced the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, which failed to end the disastrous, two-decades-long war between the North and South Vietnamese. Though the U.S. had accomplished withdrawal of troops “In 1974,” the Nixon administration continued to threaten renewed intervention – keeping the wounds of the nation’s grief, anger, and anxiety open and salted.

^{vii} You would know it if you heard it: the Rhodes sound was a 1970s staple, notably to my ear and record player on The Doors’ 1971 “Riders on the Storm.”

^{viii} Myers, Marc. “[How Stevie Wonder Created ‘Love’s in Need of Love Today](#),”” *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2015. From the *Journal*’s Arts section’s “Anatomy of a Song” series.

^{ix} To fellow musician, Syreeta Wright.

^x Fusilli, Jim. “[The Year We Almost Lost Stevie Wonder](#),” *Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2013. Referencing two *Journal* articles about Stevie Wonder in a single sermon? Fill out the unlikeliest square on your Bingo card ...

^{xi} Wonder, “Love’s In Need Of Love Today.”

^{xii} Myers.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Risking too fine a point, viral treatments’ promised inauguration of a new stage in this pandemic does not resolve the uncertainty of that next season’s shape and character. Among the many questions, who will be vaccinated first? Who will refuse vaccination? Will the vaccines work? How will the world and our country respond to the pandemic’s inevitable persistence?

^{xv} At a time when our deeply damaging politics approach an uncertain resolution, our citizenry now engages civic debates armed with automatic weapons, as well as ideologies. No matter what happens on November 3, who is readying for November 4?

^{xvi} The state of Massachusetts will emerge from COVID-19 with a rate of unemployment among the highest in the country, and with public school systems newly ravaged by generational, systemic, racial inequities. Can the further educational ground lost during the last year be regained? Can old rhythms and habits of school-going be restored?

^{xvii} Matthew 22:21.

^{xviii} “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s ...”

^{xix} Our “Touching Home” and “Prayer on the Square” launches make clear our procession to the altar is underway.

^{xx} Wonder, “Love’s In Need Of Love Today.”