

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

November 1, 2020

*All Saints Day, Matthew 5:1-12*

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

*Teddy sniffing glue –  
he was twelve-years-old –  
fell from the roof on East Two-Nine.  
Cathy was eleven when she pulled the plug  
on twenty-six reds and a bottle of wine.  
Bobby got leukemia –  
fourteen-years-old –  
he looked sixty-five when he died,  
he was a friend of mine.*

*These are people who have died, died  
These are people who have died, died ...  
They were all my friends, and they died.<sup>i</sup>*

A passer-by, peering into a window of the ground-floor apartment, first saw it: Jim Carroll slumping from his desk in his childhood home. “Classic Inwood,” joked a friend from the neighborhood[, “some nosy neighbor always peeping.”]<sup>ii</sup>

After sixty years of hard living, Carroll had steered himself back into the Irish-Catholic culture against which he had rebelled all his life, from before his first spike of heroin in junior high; from before he hustled the Times Square “vice-presidents of toothpaste firms”<sup>iii</sup> (as he called them and) who funded his addictions; from before he worked at Andy Warhol’s Factory<sup>iv</sup> and kept company with Allen Ginsburg and Bob Dylan; from before he rebelled *even against his own rebellion* – getting clean, pursuing poetry,<sup>v</sup> moving to San Diego, fronting The Jim Carroll Band<sup>vi</sup> ... and recording that deeply personal, autobiographical anthem, “People Who Have Died” – maybe the last, great punk-rock song.<sup>vii</sup>

A superstar athlete with an artist’s gifts for observation, in 1978 a California press published his adolescent journal as *The Basketball Diaries*. The *Diaries* span the years 1963 to 1966 – from the time Carroll was 13, until he was 17 – including Carroll’s scholarshipped high-school career at Trinity School, that pressed-collar preparatory originally launched by Trinity (Episcopal) Church-Wall Street. Rife with the unthinking, inherited bigotry of a feral youth, the journal proves a difficult read in 2020 – his unreconciled hostilities offensive, even injurious.<sup>viii</sup>

Its episodic narrative traces a descent from what Carroll explains as his “‘Pepsi-Cola’ habit:” one that “sneaks up on you while you’re telling yourself, ‘I been [messing] around with junk for three years,’” he writes, ‘I know when to lay off and I ain’t getting me no habit, [I’ve got it *handled*, and this ain’t nothing more than a taste of the Pepsi-Cola, dig].’ But one morning you wake up, suddenly your nose is running and your eyes are tearing and ... The laugh’s on you, [cause you ain’t got nothing] ‘under control.’”<sup>ix</sup>

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, that occasion when we remember the “intercommunion”<sup>x</sup> of *all* the saints: both the saints *militant* and the saints *triumphant*:

the **saints militant**, those believers, who – like us – walk as yet by faith; and

the **saints triumphant**, those who lived their lives in faith, and have since died in the same.

The Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament Epistles refer to “saints” as *all* believers in Jesus Christ – *all believers* – and today’s commemoration challenges our tendency to think of “saints” as an ecclesial Hall of Fame, one populated exclusively by renown figures from our Christian past. Reading our appointment from the Gospel of Matthew with *this* understanding, the Beatitudes do not simply catalogue the character of long-ago all-stars, but affirm and commission us ordinary saints, too.

That is, Jesus does not preach, “Blessed were they who *were* meek.” *No*. Instead, Jesus declares “Blessed are you who *are* meek ... *you* will inherit the earth.”<sup>xi</sup>

See, Jesus issues the “Sermon on the Mount,” as a protest – **a declaration of defiance** – for these Beatitudes invert the world where wealth, and power, and status demonstrate God’s blessing.

In his sermon, Jesus dismisses the self-righteous and all those foolish enough to believe they have it “*handled*.” Jesus marginalizes the aggressive and the antagonistic, and centers instead the merciful and the peacemaking ... the unknown and the overlooked.

Carroll sings:

*... Sly in Vietnam took a bullet in the head.  
And Bobby OD’d on the night that he was wed ...  
Judy jumped in front of a subway train  
[And] Eddie got slit in the jugular vein,  
Eddie, I miss you more than all the others.  
This song is for you, my brother!*

*These are people who have died, died  
These are people who have died, died ...  
They were all my friends, and they died.*<sup>xii</sup>

As the summer of 1966 neared its close, the soon-to-be-seventeen-year-old Carroll journaled of an attempt to quit heroin. Describing the hot flashes, the “cold ripples,” and the terrible sickness, he explains, “I have to kick this now because I got to get back to ... HIGH SCHOOL in two weeks! ... I mean, I just can’t believe how unslick I feel.”<sup>xiii</sup>

The next entry begins, “It’s been about a week now since I [journaled], in fact [that] last one I wrote [was] a bit off key since I had been cold turk three days when I scribbled ... To tell the truth, my ‘withdrawal’ only lasted one more day ... Now I’m back as good or bad as ever ...

“[Anyway,] ... this therapy rap session I went to last night with a few other H pals [set me thinking]. Some lady professor there asked at one point if we [felt] guilty about using junk. I [‘m thinking] now ... Like just what is *guilty* or who is [*guilty*]? Big business dudes make billions ... and they ain’t shelling out a reefer’s worth of tax. [*Are they guilty?*] Kids walk through the jungle I don’t know how far away and shoot people, and white haired old men in smoking jacket armchairs make laws to keep it all going smoothly. [*Are they guilty?*] I [go for a swim] in the river [with my buddies,] and [we] have to duck huge amounts of [human waste, let’s call it,] and grease and ‘newly discovered miracle fibers’ ... because those smokestack companies don’t [care about me or nothing other than the wad in their wallets – *Are they guilty?* ... You got to see that junk is just another nine to five gig in the end. The hours are a bit more inclined toward the shadows[, but it’s a life no more guilty than yours, prof.]”<sup>xiv</sup>

Carroll’s *Diaries* and “People Who Have Died” join Jesus’ defiance: *I was here!* They declare.

*I lived and laughed and struggled. I survived these unfair streets: on those dark alleys and in the corners of the park you won’t visit. And I was not alone. Those kids you bury out on Hart Island in the potter’s field – whose names you never knew, whose names nobody ever called – they were my people! Not boardroom squares, but punks and junkies who knew my name.*

“These are people who have died –  
I [loved] them all, and I miss them [still].”<sup>xv</sup>

See, by his protest song, Carroll commissions his friends to where Jesus calls *us*:

where the pure in heart see God!

where all who hunger and thirst for righteousness – *all who hunger and thirst* – are filled!

where care and the common good overcome politics!

where the lonely and the lost find Love!

where the merciful receive mercy!

where the anxious – the anxious, the fearful – for this week and for all these days find *peace!*

Carroll died at his desk on September 11, 2009 – alone, and yet still a spectacle, his neighbors peering through the drapes. Having joined the ranks of those about whom he had sung in his street-corner necrology, a Greenwich Village Catholic church prayed his funeral mass.<sup>xvi</sup>

And, friends, on this All Saints Day at Trinity Church in the City of Boston, I believe Jim Carroll gathers with us.<sup>xvii</sup> Not because of those things he had done or left undone, but because in the mystery of the union between Christ and the Church, God binds the living and the dead. *God binds the living and the dead*, and not by Halloween crystal balls, but by *Love*: God’s Love of us, our Love of God, and our Love for one another.

By *his* love, then, those Carroll never forgot – Teddy and Cathy, Bobby, Sly, Eddie – they’re all here, too, along with everyone we know and love, all those we *have* known and we *have* loved.<sup>xviii</sup>

Phillips, John, and H.H, if you want to go that way. *Yes, they’re here.*

But, so, too, Julie and Bill are *here*.

And my grandparents, Gina and Sir and Granny – my nephew, Henry – *they’re all here.*

Jane, Joan, and Janet ... Fran, William, and Steve – *here.*

All of us ruddy saints still on earth ... are ... *here!*

Take heart, then, Trinity Church! For our Communion punches through this marble and plaster and shatters these leaded windows. “Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven”<sup>xix</sup> knock down our sanctuary walls and make room at this altar for *you*, wherever you are – *makes room for us*, and for all those we love.

These saints triumphant and saints militant – mine and yours, known and unknown – join us in Jesus’ great defiance. From the Sermon on the Mount to his triumph over death itself, this intercommunion strengthens us **to stand at the brink of whatever happens next**, and to sing *our* protest song echoing from before time and for ever:

*Alleluia!*

*Alleluia!*

*Alleluia!*<sup>xx</sup>

In the name of God,  
we pray for all the saints;  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> The Jim Carroll Band. “[People Who Have Died](#).” *Catholic Boy*. Atco Records, 1980. I could not find an “official” video online, so commend this live performance of Jim Carroll singing with Lou Reed.

<sup>ii</sup> Williams, Alex. “[Jim Carroll’s Long Way Home](#).” *New York Times*, September 25, 2009.

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<sup>iii</sup> Carroll, Jim. *The Basketball Diaries*. Penguin Books, 1987, p. 110. Though originally published by Tombouctou Books in 1978, I note page numbers from the 1987 Penguin edition.

<sup>iv</sup> The interwebs report that it is Jim Carroll who can be heard asking about drugs between songs of The Velvet Underground's *Live At Max's Kansas City*.

<sup>v</sup> Carroll's beatnik-inspired, spoken-word albums are worth a listen, though his verse is, generally, not my bag. While he does have moments of catch-my-breath brilliance, he (too often) reads as something clumsier – more like Jim Morrison than Frank O'Hara.

<sup>vi</sup> At the urging of his former girlfriend and collaborator, Patti Smith.

<sup>vii</sup> I mostly stand by this claim. A Bob Clearmountain-produced effort is too clean to be punk, but Carroll's rough edges may balance the record's credibility.

<sup>viii</sup> The Alex Williams' *Times* article I reference shares from a letter Carroll wrote to a friend: "My self-sabotaging tendencies in all aspects of my life, along with the validation [needs,] go without saying ... There are deep seeded reasons for both, but the latter is also an outcome of the way [the famous] are spoiled and coddled ... when you are on top, and the quickness with which everyone scatters when you recede [in] a moment." While I do find from what I have read that Carroll worked hard at redemption later in his life – and while a 13-year-old heroin addict deserves more grace than I do – I cannot commend his *Diaries*. His bigoted language is disqualifying and can injure people, no matter whether the epithets voiced his truest heart.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Basketball Diaries*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>x</sup> As in the collect appointed for All Saints Day: "Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Christ, our Lord ..."

<sup>xi</sup> Matthew 5:5.

<sup>xii</sup> "People Who Have Died." I blend a couple of verses here. Unaltered, they read:

*G-berg and Georgie let their gimmicks\* go rotten,  
so they died of hepatitis in Upper Manhattan.  
Bobby OD'd on Drano on the night that he was wed.  
They were two more friends of mine,  
Two more friends that died –  
I miss 'em, and they died!*

*Mary took a dry dive from a hotel room,  
and Bobby hung himself from a cell in the tombs.  
Judy jumped in front of a subway train  
[And] Eddie got slit in the jugular vein,  
Eddie, I miss you more than all the others.  
This song is for you, my brother!*

\*In Carroll's parlance, a "gimmick" is the syringe setup used for mainlining heroin. Carroll and his companions shared needles – gimmicks – that they hid around Central Park and kept in one another's apartments.

<sup>xiii</sup> *The Basketball Diaries*, p. 198. The ALL-CAPS emphasis is his.

<sup>xiv</sup> *The Basketball Diaries*, p. 199. I added the "Are they guilty?" refrain and reordered the last line to provide context, I intend as consistent with the journal entry.

<sup>xv</sup> "People Who Have Died." I combined elements of the varying choruses in the studio recording.

<sup>xvi</sup> Williams.

<sup>xvii</sup> This is a complicated claim, and I do not intend it as offensive: either to those who find Carroll offensive, or to those who feel defensive of Carroll's faith as independent. I also do not affirm a notion like Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christian." Instead, I suggest that Carroll and all of us come to the table *as we are* – the integrity of our own faith and failings intact. Yet, because we love God, and because God loves all, anytime we are in God's company, we are in the company of "the great cloud" – all those who have come before us, all of those who are still with us. I ascribe the "how" of all this to "the mystery of the union between Christ and [the] Church" (as its phrased in the Episcopal marriage rite).

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<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xix</sup> From the Eucharistic prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer*, as in Eucharistic Prayer A, p. 362.

<sup>xx</sup> Most familiarly to Episcopalians, from the burial offices in the *Book of Common Prayer*, as in p. 499.