

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
January 10, 2020
The Baptism of Our Lord, Romans 12

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

Good morning, Trinity Church.

With thanks to the Very Rev. Dr. Cynthia Briggs Kittredge – friend of our parish and friend of mine, sister of The Diocese of Massachusetts and Dean of this, the Seminary of the Southwest – I greet you from the pulpit of Christ Chapel. Re-enlivening our Austin-To-Boston bonds, I pray this setting will witness, wherever we are, the loving reach of our Episcopal Church and the righteous power of our shared ministry.

For Christmas, my family tucked a daily calendar of “Dad Jokes” into my stocking. I tore away and took with me the first light-hearted pages before beginning the pilgrimage to my aunt’s burial last week. Since then, I have called my daughter each day, and she has delivered the next joke in the set. The second of these lamented:

“You know, I feel sorry for parallel lines – they have so much in common, but they’ll never meet” ... *parallel lines – they have so much in common, but they’ll never meet.*

Recognizing our dual-citizenship – forever made for God’s Kingdom and, yet, always subject to earthly Empire – and considering the real peril of these days in our national life, *take heart* that we Christians have a God who does not abandon us in our hour of darkness. By our baptismal commission, our God covenants to be with us, a partner and inspiration, to confront the worst of our world and ourselves with that mightiest of all forces: **Love.**

Let us, then, clearly distinguish American democracy and the Christian mission, for while these enduring projects have a history of mutual influence – at times to healthy effect, at others, to gross injustice – their related trajectories have never been the same. Our American democracy, like all political forms, acts for its self-preservation, while Christianity endeavors time’s fulfilment, when our reconciliation to God and with one another will render all temporal institutions obsolete. Our American democracy seeks to coopt Christianity’s authority for its own purposes, while Christianity seeks the redemption and transformation of our civic life. Therefore, these dual forces that shape our lives and identities remain like parallel lines running in and through and above us. And no matter our affection for all they share in common, we must realize that these lines will *never meet.*

In this understanding, we American Christians “continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers,” *first* to join with God and one another in loving Communion, and not in representative government. As the citizenry of God’s Kingdom, we “seek and serve Christ in all persons and love our neighbor as ourselves” *first* to fulfill our Covenant promises, and not our national ideals. As members of Christ’s Body, we “strive for justice and peace among all people,” *first* to inaugurate Beloved Community, and not any partisan presidency.

Therefore, we who are Trinity Church in the City of Boston counter the lies and decry the violence of January 6 because of their offense against truth and their injury to human dignity, and not because of their damage to American democracy. Indeed, our faith’s integrity depends upon this essential priority: our Christian profession preceding and informing our politics, and not the reverse. For with baptism as our warrant, we can dig deeper into these events and name *racism* – *its* lies and *its* injury to human dignity – as the root cause of Wednesday’s insurrection. And, with baptism as our warrant, we can employ the power of Love to counter and heal that racism and its injuries.

Realizing the horror of this reality, many white Americans feel an urgent need to distinguish ourselves from the open hate of the Capitol mob. This defensiveness wants to highlight our partisan values’ superficial overlap with our Gospel aspirations, and wants our church associations to provide us cover, to make clear that *we* white Christians are not like *those* white Christians. Pointing to the media photographs and live-streamed videos, we want our congregations to announce on our behalf, “But that is not who *we* are!”

Yet, I say to you, that is, inescapably and fundamentally, parcel to who we are – complicit beneficiaries of the horrible racism with which our nation was wrought and which still sustains its gross inequities. Prioritizing our need to “feel better” about ourselves distracts us from solidarity with the communities who mortally suffer for the threats these events have exposed and express, and consequentially delays our transformation of those Imperial forces running in and through and above us.

So much of our furtive, reactive participation in liberal rituals *reinforces* white supremacy and does not challenge it, perpetuating, rather than resolving, white America’s insatiable insecurities. And, yet, in this overwhelming moment, the God of all remains even with us who deserve that good company least, charging we white Americans to renew our commitment to set the needs of others before ourselves as our unceasing devotion, and to grapple with renewed seriousness our privilege and its human costs. Such an interrogation recognizes that this insurrection’s grossest expressions of white supremacy were not written on sweatshirts, but lurked in the presumption beneath the seditionists’ actions and the authorities’ immediate responses to it: this horde of whiteness never imagined their behavior would reap anything other than lenient exception, understanding, and accolade.

“This is *my* house!” one rioter shouted. It did not occur to him or his conspirators that there would be consequences to their actions, because they walk blithely through a world they understand as their exclusive entitlement. *And they were right*: one rank of Capitol police yielded to them as though they were a busload of tourists, and no one less than the President and

his family offered the understanding they expected – “This is what happens when you steal an election ...” and the accolade they anticipated: “American patriots ... We love you ... You are very special ... Remember this day forever.”

Now, confronting these same horrors, many Black Americans did not enjoy the luxury to first feel embarrassed or ashamed, but, instead, felt despairing and afraid, understanding bone-deep that these marauders stormed the Capitol to take away the gains and protections in the Law won by blood and bravery in the last century-and-a-half since the abolition of slavery, since the right to vote ... that this white horde expected to partner their supremacist worldview with the power and backing of the police and the justice system ... and that, rather than knocking down the doors of Congress, that this horde would next come to knock down the doors of their homes.ⁱ

Lord, have mercy.

As Christians, as the Citizenry of God’s Kingdom, as the Body of Christ, we must recognize this diversity of impact among Black and white Americans, and honor the different felt experiences of each. Then, afraid and angry, as we are; discouraged and disillusioned, as we are; uncertain and unconvinced, as we are; we must join ourselves in the name of Jesus, until no one suffers for the privilege of another. And no matter the intensity of this moment, in this commitment we must remain unwavering in our fundamental Christian mission, in that mightiest of forces: **Love**. Our fidelity in love, and to love, and for love, must be our first, our last, our only opposition to Empire, or we will compromise our credibility and quarter the power of all we seek to do, of all God calls us to do.

This is the priority Paul commends in the commission that we live in this world without “conforming” ourselves to it.ⁱⁱ To become a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” we must be humble, not “think[ing of ourselves] more highly than [we] ought to think ... For as in one body[,] we have many members, ... we, who are many, *are* one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” ... *we are members of one another!*

Living together in this Spirit, we “Let love be genuine; [we despise] what is evil[, and, yet, we] hold fast to what is good[. We] love one another with mutual affection [and we] outdo one another in showing honor. [We d]o not lag in zeal, [are] ardent in spirit, [and] serve the Lord. [We r]ejoice in hope ... [and] persevere in prayer. [We c]ontribute to the needs of the saints [and we] extend hospitality to strangers.”

And, people of God, we “do not [allow ourselves to] be overcome by evil, but [we] overcome evil with good.” Hear that again: *we do not [allow ourselves to] be overcome by evil, but [we] overcome evil with good*. Any energy we devote to hating these aggressors and their enablers is lost to God, a gift to the darkness we seek to dispel. Instead, in the model of Jesus, we “do not repay anyone evil for evil, but seek [the *higher* road,] what is noble in the sight of all.”

By our constancy in these loving devotions, “[We will r]ejoice with those who rejoice, [and will] weep with those who weep. [We will l]ive in harmony with one another ... And,] If it is possible, so far as it depends on us, we [will] live peaceably with all.”

Parallel lines – they have so much in common, but they’ll never meet.

Of course, as an American invested in the potential of our nation, I understand and I grieve the malevolent partisanship leading to this week’s seditious events. Subject to Empire as we all are, I carry grave concern for what this uprising portends, and I affirm the need for legal accountability and careful stewardship of our democracy in this moment.

Yet, with you and with our God, I remain *first* a servant of the Cross and the empty tomb, before the Constitution or the United States.ⁱⁱⁱ With you and with our God, I prioritize my membership in the Body of Christ before my citizenship in this nation. With you and in the company of the Holy Spirit, I recognize that God’s hopes are not American dreams, and even that which is most precious in our national ideals will not realize the Beloved Community. In the words of the prophet, “Only *Love* can do that.”

Love, the only force with the power to redeem and transform our nation and our world; *Love*, the only force with the power to overcome the racism that terrorizes us; *Love*, the only force with the power to inaugurate God’s reign.

In this moment as always, I pray that we will seek and share this *Love together*, all in the name of God who loved us first.

Amen.

ⁱ While the sermon focuses on the different felt experiences of Black and white Americans in response to the January 6 Insurrection, this should not be read to diminish the impact on all Indigenous and people of color, and those of faith traditions other than Christianity, especially the Jewish community, which was specifically threatened by many of the aggressors.

ⁱⁱ We read Romans 12 as the epistle this morning, and I draw all the quotes that follow from that chapter.

ⁱⁱⁱ Importantly, I do not intend to suggest or imply that faith, generally, or the Christian faith, specifically, exempts one from the American legal system. Indeed, the sermon intends to challenge exactly such a fascist worldview as espoused by the seditionists, and, having grown up in the Deep South, I have personally witnessed the abuse of those who assume the power of the state in the name of Christianity. Rather, by expressing the priority of our faith, I hope to point us toward a path out of the despair many of us are feeling. As was Paul’s intention in his encouraging letter to the Roman church, I name that path as the hope of the Gospel and the Love of God.