

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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V Easter, John 15:1-8

*Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

Scattered, smothered, and peppered – an extra-large order of hash browns.ⁱ

A ham-and-cheese omelet with four triangles of overly buttered toast ready to be slathered with jelly for a dessert.ⁱⁱ

All lubricated by a bottomless cup of coffee (and, back in the day, a half-pack of cigarettesⁱⁱⁱ).

Lord, have mercy, I love the Waffle House. Whether taking that road-trip exit where its iconic sign pokes over an interstate’s treeline from the parking lot of a Super 8 motel ... or settling into a local restaurant for a pre-dawn breakfast or a wee-hours nightcap of greasy potato shreds, no matter; the Waffle House is always open.

And around the time of our last pre-pandemic Thanksgiving in 2019, *The Washington Post* ran a story about a Birmingham, Alabama Waffle House where customer Evan Crispo rolled in for a midnight snack.^{iv} Perhaps waking from a stupor following the birthday party he had earlier attended, Crispo realized his order (a double waffle, no syrup) was delayed. The twenty-four-year old looked up from his phone, took stock of the situation, and saw only a single Waffle House employee in the building.

“The look on his face was maybe fear, maybe shock, maybe bewilderment,” Crispo said of the worker, whose nametag [read,] ‘Ben.’^v He watched as Ben took the orders, cooked the food, cleared the tables, operated the washer, and worked the register.

Now, beginning with the thirteenth chapter of John’s Gospel, “the hour” to which Jesus has many times made reference finally begins to draw discernibly near. While this turn in the Gospel narrative raises the *drama* of the moment, the pace of the storytelling nonetheless *relaxes*. During the first dozen chapters we have *hurriedly* followed our Lord from one bustling event to the next – the calling of his first disciples, to the performance of his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee; from his cleansing of the Temple to his healings in Samaria; from his feeding of the five thousand, to his walking on the sea; from his raising of Lazarus from the dead, to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem ... Jesus has been busy! Now the action slows to a single setting for almost five chapters as Jesus sits down to supper with his friends. The New International Version renders the opening bars of this section: “It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.”^{vi}

As with the resurrection appearances we have heard from the Gospel of Luke in these Sundays since Easter, Jesus again chooses a shared meal as the setting for the world's salvation, the setting to show his closest friends "the full extent of his love." Of course, this "Farewell Discourse" narrates no ordinary dinner party, and the action does not altogether pause: in addition to the eating and drinking, remember that there will be washing and betraying, prophesying and praying. Yet "The Big Speech" holds all this, the bubbling drama making clear that even after all the time spent with Jesus, there remained then – as there remains now – the real threat that the disciples would misunderstand what "following Jesus" required of them.

Into this context Jesus speaks his loving word: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower ... Abide in me as I abide in you ... If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."^{vii}

Jesus' claim as the "*true* vine" (and, as we heard last week, as the "*good* shepherd") declares not only who he is as the Christ, but who *we are* as Christians, as his followers, as disciples. The imagery he chooses inextricably binds his nature with ours – *ours*, individually, and *ours*, as the Body of God in the world. That is, Jesus names that we are only who God calls us to be when we are among the flock, sheep in God's great fold, following our Good Shepherd. We are only who God calls us to be when we recognize our life in the *true* vine, not in the thorny bramble of this world, but in the true vine of heaven, God the Creator as the vinegrower: "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me," we in God and God in us, living and loving together and as one."^{viii}

More than I love the Waffle House only, I love diners:^{ix} the Dysart's Truck Stop in Bangor; the old George's Grill on King's Highway in Shreveport; the Pig Stand in San Antonio; breakfast for supper ... the waitresses with their eyeglasses on a beaded string ... the fellow patrons taking their time with crossword puzzles, or homework, or a three-inch thick, hard-back science-fiction novel resting on a Formica countertop.

At the most righteous diners, easing onto a stool means becoming part of a community – not the pressed shirts of a calorie-counting lunch-hour crowd or the vogue singles of a cocktail hotspot, but a multichromatic company of passers-through who prefer eating alone in the company of others who are eating alone ... of tipsy couples whispering to one another on the same side of the booth ... of rowdy gaggles fit for the Mos Eisley Cantina.^x

I imagine such a motley crew back at the Birmingham Waffle House, when Evan Crispo saw Ben begin to visit with a customer in a blue shirt, saw Ben hand that man an apron, and saw that customer start working the sink.

"It was a transition so smooth I initially assumed it was a staff member returning to their shift," Crispo shared. [But] "It wasn't. It was [just a somebody] who answered the call ... [a somebody who washed] dishes, [a somebody who] stacked plates."^{xi}

Soon after, a woman in a sequined cocktail dress and high heels stood up from her seat and started making coffee. Another patron in a red shirt began busing tables, and, along with Ben, these strangers kept the eggs frying for the 30-odd hungry people crowded into the unassuming diner well after midnight on State Highway 280. Reflecting on the experience, Crispo declared, “Humanity isn’t [just] good, it’s great.”

Thanks be to God, as branches of our Vinegrower, Jesus reassures us that we will not be left alone to wilt with overwhelm or to grow wild with indulgence. No, the One who made us, *tends* us, so that we should fear no threat in the promise of “withering” or “burning,”^{xii} for in this teaching, Jesus declares what is *already* true: that we *already* have been “pruned,”^{xiii} that we *already* have been grafted into this one, true vine. And no matter how life disappoints or troubles us, the work of the Vinegrower remains not just good, but *great* – and, therefore, by our very nature, we *already* can bear fruit worthy of God’s Kingdom.

Fundamentally, we at Trinity Church gather to celebrate *this Good News!*

We gather to share in the joyful revelation that this vineyard is never for ourselves only, but always for the benefit of this frustrating world that Jesus loves ... this maddening world for which Jesus breathed his last this beautiful and wonderful world for which God raised Jesus out of death and into eternal life. Thereby, we rise with the risen Christ

as we gather not to be fed, but to realize how God has made us for feeding;

as we gather not to judge, but – together – to grow in understanding;

as we gather not in the assumption of our own righteousness, but in “living and moving and having our being”^{xiv} *humbly*;

Oh, friends: all our well-intentioned strivings for structural, systemic change in the world around us – all our efforts to realize God’s grandest hopes for the creation – will mean *nothing* if we waste our time fussing and cussing that *somebody* did not bring our double waffle quickly enough. Yes, though we are subject to so much beyond our control, we still have agency – choice in our daily lives – to draw upon our very nature as branches of the true vine, and, in moments grand and modest, seek to serve, rather than be served – to love, rather than be licensed for complaint. And we do this not for a paycheck or a payoff, but because “Humanity isn’t [just] good, it’s great.”

That we would be so bold and faithful, I pray:

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

ⁱ “Scattered” means breaking up the shreds of potato so that they are crispier; “Smothered” means including diced onions on the grill; and “Peppered” means adding diced jalapenos to the mix. Lord, have mercy! So dang good.

ⁱⁱ A spoonful of jelly in one of those small, beige or light-turquoise, plastic bowls.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marlboro Light 100s.

^{iv} Klein, Allison. [“The Lone Employee At An Alabama Waffle House Was Swamped. So Customers Jumped Behind The Counter To Help.”](#) *The Washington Post*. November 11, 2019. I note the timing of the article’s publication for two reasons: first, to make clear that this moment was not some *Pandemic-be-damned, I’m eating at the Waffle House* sort of event; and, second, so that I could attribute the reference to my good friend and colleague, the Rev. Daryl T. Hay, who shared the story with our seminary cohort.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} John 13:1, NIV.

^{vii} John 15:1-8. I draw this passage and all those following from the NRSV.

^{viii} John 15:4.

^{ix} Waffle Houses are about the size and shape of a railroad car, and most of the restaurants used to have one of those jukebox setups tethered to a push-button of song listings set into the wall of each booth. Leaning into this idea of a community of commuters – of people eating alone, together – these jukeboxes always had a 45 with a couple of Waffle House-specific songs. My favorite, “Special Lady (At The Waffle House).” It begins:

“Driving this road can get lonely –
just the sound of my wheels at night –
but I know just ahead someone’s waiting,
so I look for that big yellow sign.

With coffee that’s fresh like the morning,
she’ll smile when I walk through the door.
All it took was this one-time to meet her,
and now I’m not a stranger no more.

Special Lady,
waiting for me at the Waffle House ...”

In my house, I am known to sing this song at obnoxiously high volumes, and when I mentioned a sermon about Waffle House, my family immediately grew concerned that I would sing “Special Lady” from the pulpit. Let the record show, I did not ...

^x “You’ll never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy,” Ben Kenobi warns young Luke Skywalker. That description is a little harsh for the typical diner crowd, but the best diners do have a little “villainy” scrambled with the eggs, whether a sports book run out of the kitchen, or just some teenagers scheming weekend plans to escape their parents and their bedrooms.

^{xi} Klein.

^{xii} John 15:6.

^{xiii} John 15:2.

^{xiv} From the “Collect for Guidance” in *The Book Of Common Prayer*: “O heavenly Father, in whom we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray thee so to guide and govern us by thy Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget thee, but may remember that we are ever walking in thy sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen” (from “Morning Prayer,” Rites I and II – pp. 57 and 100 – among several instances).