

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

May 30, 2021

Trinity Sunday, John 3:1-17

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

The ceremony resembled church more than I expected.

A large congregation gathered in a high-ceilinged auditorium and then stood as the organ began to play. 345 men, women, and children – all prepared to become citizens of the United States of America – processed the center aisle to their seats. Leaders of the civic liturgy, vested in courtroom robes and clericals, added concluding punctuation to this long and energetic sentence.

Following the opening of court, local clergy offered a series of prayers. A choir sang anthems, and a high-school color guard presented the flag. The presider led a version of our Episcopal calisthenics, as, together, we stood and sat ... stood and sat ... stood and sat again.

Three Fifth Graders read their award-winning essays in the “Celebrate America Creative Writing Contest.” Each composition reflected on the theme, “Why I am glad America is a nation of immigrants.” The essays voiced their authors’ sweet naïveté, views of the world still unpolluted by the disappointments and violence, cynicisms and bitterness of our national experience. Their parents pressed praying hands to their lips and offered teary encouragement from the front rows of the auditorium. The well-practiced school children read aloud of “Lady Liberty” ... of “America’s promise” ... of “[sisterhood and] brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.”

An Officer readied for the “Oath of Citizenship” by reading aloud the names of the sovereign states represented in the Naturalization class and asking petitioners from these nations to stand when he named their country of origin. The effect took my breath away: from the call of “*Croatia*,” and the soft sounds of a mother and her cooing infant rising from their chair; to the announcement of “*India*” and the thunder of springing seats as hundreds rose to their feet. In alphabetical order, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Officer read, “Afghanistan, Albania, Armenia, Austria ... Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Cameroon ... Honduras, Iceland, Indonesia, Jamaica ... Slovakia, Somalia, Sweden, Trinidad & Tobago ... Uganda, Ukraine, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe,” sixty five – *sixty-five* – nations in all. And with the petitioners now standing, the judge finally declared, “There being no objection to the recommendation of the examiner,” the “presentations and the motion of the examiner for admittance to citizenship ... [is hereby] approved and granted.”

Without any cue, the decorum of the court dropped like a magician’s curtain, and the room filled with camera flashes and raucous applause, the families and friends of these new citizens clapping and shouting and sobbing and cheering.

Every year on Trinity Sunday, we celebrate our namesake feast and explore one of our Christian faith's great mysteries: our God who, at essence, is "a Communion of persons and a Unity of being," in the language of our prayers.ⁱ This idea of Trinity is not an anachronistic whisper of some ancient formula or theological gameplay about angels fitting on the head of a pin. Rather, the Trinitarian language we inherit voices the *real* encounter of God's *real* people, who have sought to understand the diversity of God's action in the world: the power of the Creator, who calls the creation to service; the love of the Redeemer, who calls the creation to rebirth; and the gift of the Spirit, who calls the creation to eternal life.

No matter what language and images we use to describe this diverse experience, in God as Trinity we recognize both union and difference – *real* union and *real* difference.

We customarily baptize on this day to witness that **union**, the union of God's people with one another and our common "Source, Stream, and Living Water."ⁱⁱ Praying our baptismal liturgy even during these "Worship From Home" days, we declare the Grace that makes us "one Body and one Spirit ... that professes one Lord, one Faith ... that shares one hope in God's call to us" – *one* and *one* and *one*.ⁱⁱⁱ No matter our history or our situation; no matter our color or our continent; no matter our sin or our significance; in baptism God unites us in that inheritance prepared from before time and forever.

Created in the image of this generous God – and, thereby, called to bear God's image to the world – we as the Body of Christ must also witness the *difference* of this mysterious Divinity.

By setting a Naturalization ceremony beside our baptismal liturgy, I do not imply the holiness of these United States. Yet I do point to that civic image's power, stirred by the profound **difference** of those present: the Sudanese distance runner who escaped his burning village as a child to become an Olympian in this country, and who delivered the event's keynote address; the Supreme Court of Texas justice, the child of immigrants who left Mexico to find work as a welder and a custodian; those Fifth Graders with their "Celebrate America" essays and their American-born, "middle-class" parents.

That was not the America of either AM radio or progressive echo chambers. We pledged allegiance, *and* we made room for one another. Gathering in *real* difference, made possible *real* union – so many people, from so many nations, professing a commitment to "the common good," believing that the pursuit of equality, freedom, and justice for all, remained worthwhile, even achievable.

For us at Trinity Church, the image of this civic liturgy challenges our sense of ourselves – not first because of ambivalences about muddling our faith and the American experience, but because of the discomfort we feel when challenged to open the doors of our church wide enough to welcome *real* difference. The Naturalization ceremony asks us:

Do we at Trinity Church witness fully the richness of the triune God?

Do we offer to the world that diversity of tongues and gifts and goods, of ideas and convictions God hopes for us and for all communities of faith?

And if we do not, then why do we not?

Perhaps the answers are not entirely about what we want or do not want. Instead, let us assume we have had righteous intentions all along. Let us consider that our coming short of a more diverse parish results from what we have done and left undone, a gap between our intent and our impact. Perhaps we have tried too hard for too long to welcome people into a style of worship and a community life too well-established, too set in its ways. Loving as we have intended to be behind our beautiful – yet imposing – façade, perhaps we have been intimidating instead of welcoming. And, perhaps, God calls us to endeavor something new this Trinity Sunday.

Well, Trinitarians, building on the momentum of our Trinity Sunday of Giving, I have good news to share.

With the encouraging developments of the last sixteen days – the CDC’s changed guidelines released May 14; the Diocese of Massachusetts directives published May 20; and our parish survey due to close today – I can announce that we will worship in-person sooner than expected:

On Sunday, June 13, we will begin 9 a.m. outdoor worship, livestreamed and open to all.

Thanks be to God!

Led from the West Porch and facing Copley Square, we will encourage parishioners to bring lawn chairs for these services, which will include a full-length sermon. A choir will support congregational singing, and we will season these liturgies with a variety of musical styles that take advantage of the creative possibilities in this new setting. Our lay leaders – from lectors and intercessors to ushers and acolytes – will be welcome to rejoin us in their customary roles, as they are ready to do so.

After these fifteen months of Morning Prayer, we will celebrate Holy Eucharist most weeks, save for the last Sundays of June and July. On those last Sundays, we will also focus on our ministry with children, with a “Children’s Homily” led by our Director of Children’s Ministries, Cathy Portlock Pacitto, and featuring liturgical leadership from members of our children’s and youth communities.

As we have sought to achieve throughout the pandemic, this outdoor-worship strategy *keeps us as one congregation to the greatest extent possible*, allowing us to:

worship without a pre-registration process that would leave us with (literally) insiders and outsiders;

gather in a setting that science supports as the safest we can offer;

honor the energy of our Diocese’s plainspoken guidance – they wrote to us: “Outdoor services are *strongly encouraged*.”

meet the parish at its readiness, specifically the desire for Communion;
and, most importantly for this Trinity Sunday, to engage and welcome newcomers to our congregation in new ways.

Of course, there will be challenges to this plan, and we ask for your grace. Weather and Sunday-morning Copley Square events may have their way with us from time-to-time. Very occasionally, circumstances may demand we return to our remote worship, and we will give as much advance notice as possible about any changes.

Despite these inevitable challenges, I am also excited to learn through this more visible and vital presence on the Square, and I believe God will bless every generous energy we commit to this next season of our life together. Never before – and perhaps never again – will we have the circumstances and shared wherewithal to present ourselves so boldly and so openly to this city – not worrying about how widely to open the doors of the church, but to leave those doors entirely! Despite the great griefs of this pandemic, we have gained more new skills and discovered more new opportunities than we could catalogue, and I believe – *I believe, I believe!* – that the Holy Spirit is at work to do something wonderful with us in this new setting for our worship.

Friends, come and be a part of this new thing, that we who are made *one* in baptism, would be made *many* for the sake of the world.

Amen.

ⁱ From the “Proper Preface” for Trinity Sunday. *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 361, 380. Adapted only slightly from the bolded text here: “It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. For with your co-eternal Son and Holy Spirit, you are one God, one Lord, in **Trinity of Persons and Unity of Being**; and we celebrate the one and equal glory of you ...”

ⁱⁱ Cunningham, David S. *These Three Are One*. Wiley-Blackwell. 1988. Cunningham uses the image of “Source, Stream, and Living Water,” which I offer here and tend to share in liturgical formulations.

ⁱⁱⁱ From the “Baptismal Dialogue.” *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 299.