

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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Proper 6 (Year B), Mark 4:26-34

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your people, the fire of your love. *Amen.*

“Jesus began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat,” drifted out a distance, turned from his place on the water, and addressed the crowd collecting on its shore.ⁱ Speaking in parables, Jesus announced “[The Kingdom of God] is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”ⁱⁱⁱ

My oldest friend’s maternal grandfather, Bob Green, operated a ranch in West Texas. I had the honor of shaking Mr. Green’s hand six or eight times, and clutching his thick fingers and heavy palm was like being fitted into a large, rough stone. His hand did not feel worn so much as it felt that, in its time, it had done some wearing.

For years, Mr. Green wrote a short column for the Shackelford County newspaper. His crisp, honest writing bears the weight of his and his generation’s experience: wars and droughts, children and ranching, coyotes and church. My favorite of the columns concerns “The Boat,” made during the mid-1930’s by Mr. Green’s brother, Tom.ⁱⁱⁱ

Tom, as Mr. Green describes him, “finished things.” He writes, “My model airplane would end up looking like the eroded skeleton of a lizard, half uncovered and lopsided. But [Tom’s] were mint perfect and flew like birds,[, ever one].”

The boat in question was a flat-bottomed, all-wooden design imagined and built by Tom “exclusively for [the boys] to run the trotlines^{iv} [they] eternally had out in Hubbard Creek.” And, Mr. Green remembers, “That boat was a classic. In typical Tom Green style, it progressed carefully and very thoroughly. It remained in clamps for weeks like a patient in traction while the glue absolutely set up. Non-rusting brass screws were used in lavish but orderly fashion throughout its construction. Caulking was neatly inset in every seam. Toward the finish, a splendid paint job was applied. Bright yellow interior, kelly-green exterior, sky-blue seats, and jet-black bottom.

“Your eyes automatically blinked when looking upon it.”

From *his* boat on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus does not issue any tired cliché about small packages. Rather, Jesus tells the parable of the mustard seed to describe the very coming of God’s Kingdom ... the *very coming of God’s Kingdom*. He asks us to consider: if the Kingdom of God arrives in the way a mustard seed grows into a tree, then how does the Kingdom come?

Well, for one, the Kingdom comes slowly. Imperceptibly slow. Even the fastest growing children and weeds grow more slowly than we can observe in real time. Sure, we can track their growth on a doorframe or, with some annoyance, monitor as the latter creep into our garden. But we cannot *see* the growing. We cannot *watch* them grow. And yet, from the signs we can observe, we know that they are.

See, that is how the Kingdom comes – though we cannot observe each increment of its approach, we, nonetheless, do see that it is on its way, the Holy Spirit notching our faithful doorframe the way we marked Mary Virginia and Michael Stephens, four years and seven years ... fourteen years and seventeen years. Moments of joy and visits of Grace ... a relationship healed, a hope fulfilled, a community made well, the reign of God underway in the midst of us.

See, this Kingdom comes about “Tom Green style:” slowly, carefully, thoroughly.

Mr. Green describes the day they launched The Boat, how the boys bought a bottle of lime rickey to break across its bow, but, upon closer inspection of the sturdy bottle, decided instead to only slosh The Boat with the drink’s sticky green foam.^v And he tells how The Boat did float, floated for many years, in fact, hauling “untold poundage of catfish,” making countless circuits down the trotline to bait and to collect, ferrying the young men wherever they needed to go. And, when a heavy rain came and washed The Boat downstream, the boys would saddle up their horses and ride the banks of the creek until they discovered it again, usually stuck in some drift, not too far from its accustomed home.

“But the idyllic years passed,” Mr. Green writes. “Boys grew up. Wars took place. Tom went to England and France. I went to Asia. The Boat leaned against the side of the hay barn, paint faded and peeling.

“And then fate, director of affairs for boys, boats, and worlds, took a hand. One day a disaster of a sort occurred in the milk cow lot. The hay manger's bottom collapsed ... and ‘wouldn't hold hay.’ My father, never one to wring hands and wonder what, oh what, to do, immediately ordered The Boat brought forth and inserted under the V shaped 2 x 4's that held the hay for the milk cows to munch.

“And that was done. As with most superior designs, The Boat worked admirably wherever it was placed, even as a hay manger bottom.”

I like this part of the story best, the part that can only be written upon reflection, a reflection at once joyful and lonesome: lonesome for brothers and boats and youth, joyful for their good memory. It’s this part that’s written with the richest sense of gift, of gratitude.

See, The Boat, despite Tom’s designing and building, despite Mr. Green’s floating and retrieving, *never belonged to them*. The Boat, more than anything, belonged to the creek, to the ranch, to the early mornings and long afternoons of their West Texas boyhood. A force beyond their bones called them to that skiff’s stewardship: called for Tom Green to bring it into being, called for the boys to use it well, and, then, *called them to give it away* ... even if its new charge was different from the one they so long enjoyed.^{vi}

Back here in Boston, neither architect Henry Hobson Richardson nor Rector Phillips Brooks could have imagined us out here today: our collapsible camp chairs and mobile devices, lighting along the stone branches of Trinity Church an eager, thirsty brood: chirping, singing to God, calling out to one another and to the city.

Our faith's physical home – glorious and good – has watched over this Square and the world's changes for nearly 150 years. Inside, its high ceilings and colorful glass – “Your eyes automatically [blink] when looking upon them” – have hauled “untold poundage” of prayer into the company of heaven. And when the storms have come and tested its pilings, faithful souls have wrested it from the drift, patched it and returned it to service. God willing and this long pandemic relenting, soon and very soon, we will be back inside, settling into our familiar pews, kneeling at our treasured altar, breathing deep and easy its comforts and inspirations.

Yet what was once taken for granted, can no longer be, for the world has been growing up since we were last together. And when we return more fully, not even this building's singular beauty will be enough, if it ever was. In this emerging season of life, God calls us to “resurrection, not restoration,” as we have named it.

Now, be clear: our becoming something new is not a judgement on the joys that have been – no more than boys becoming men and trading the trotlines of home for the frontlines of a faraway war ... no more than a seed shedding its shell and growing from a shoot to a shrub. No, with a rich sense of gift and gratitude, now we must do our part to set ourselves and our beloved Trinity Church beneath a world collapsing under the weight of itself ... to bear the Good News in fresh ways ... to love more and to love better.

And, people of God, take heart that this good work is already underway, and *you are already a part of it!* For God long ago commenced this faithful transformation among us – slowly and thoroughly, the way a new boat's glue sets, the way a mustard seed sprouts. Your presence for Worship from the West Porch bears Grace and brings hope! Pitching our tent and presenting ourselves to our city with a new energy, this very morning the Holy Spirit notches the door frame of this grand entrance, announcing that the Kingdom of God has come a little closer, encouraging us to stay faithful ... to keep at it ... to keep going.

For the life of the world to come,
I pray in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

ⁱ Mark 4:1.

ⁱⁱ Mark 4:31-32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Green, Bob. “Meanwhile ... Back At The Ranch.” *The Albany Times*, Thursday, August 23, 1979. This story appeared in Mr. Green's regular column. Mr. Green's papers are part of the University of Texas collection (and, at least in the case of these pieces from *The Albany Times*, also available from Mr. Green's grandson, my friend, Rob).

^{iv} In New England, trotlines catch crabs just below the surface of the ocean. In West Texas, Louisiana, and parts therearound, trotlines hook catfish at the bottom of a creek, river, or lake.

^v In the article, Mr. Green explains in more detail The Boat's construction in shop class, "under the tutelage of Coach Boone Yarborough." Of its launch day, he writes with such moving clarity:

"Like pallbearers, we carefully carried the boat out [of the shop, which was located under the bleachers in the old stone gymnasium,] and loaded it in the bed of his model 'T' pickup (Old Lizzie) and headed out for the ranch and the launching in Hubbard Creek. What a fine, fine day that was! Winter was behind us, spring upon us and summer with its remission of school before us ... Even Old Lizzie sensed the mood of euphoria and, for a change, ran perfectly. We actually reached her top speed of 43 mph for a brief downhill run near the county line."

^{vi} Mr. Green concludes his piece: "The Boat belonged to another day and another way. *Sic transit gloria.*"