

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

August 29, 2021

XIV Pentecost, Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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

Oh, friends: the floaties have been deflated and tucked into their corner of the basement, and #2 pencils have been added to our grocery lists. The grandkids have been returned to their parents,ⁱ and, as the sun sets earlier and earlier, its late afternoon glow has even begun to catch the aluminum glint [don't say it!] of the snow shovel hanging in our garage.

See, that contemporary American, renewal ritual of “Back-to-School” is officially underway, and hooray that is! For today, everybody's favorite football team remains undefeated ... even those Cam-Newton/Mac-Jones-led Pats who, like Luke Skywalker in the Dagobah cave,ⁱⁱ will have to face forever-young Tom Brady, the erudite Gronk, and the defending-champion Buccaneers right here at Foxboro on October 3 ... yes, everyone is undefeated (for now).ⁱⁱⁱ Today every report card is a clean slate, all of last year's shortcomings and struggles but a memory: and young people, listen to me, for I say to you, do like Elsa^{iv} and “Let it go,” let ‘em all go.

For today, *all things are new*, and for everyone heading back to school, I want to tell you a story about the summer before my fifth-grade year. See, that June, my family moved 92 miles west, from Monroe, to Shreveport, Louisiana, and though I looked forward to my first day in a new school in a new town, I did not know a single, solitary soul – not one! I was somewhere between nervously excited and nervously terrified, and my mother, sensing my turmoil, blew some wind in my sails with the announcement that she would allow me to pick out brand-new shoes for my first day.

She took me to the J.C. Penney's at South Park Mall – the entrance right there across from the Morrow's Nut House – and I chose a pair of fire-truck red, Converse, Chuck Taylor high-tops. Those kicks were *beautiful*: the classic star on each ankle, the white rubber toe, that perfect black stripe outlining the soles – mmmm-hmmm! With those on my feet, I was ready for adventure.

Well, leaving Louisiana and those Chucks for a bit – as we ready for school, this morning's Lectionary delivers us passages from Deuteronomy and from the Gospel of Mark. In the lesson from Deuteronomy, Moses stands with Israel also on the border of something new, on the edge of the Promised Land. And as they ready to make their way into that country they had sought for so long, he describes the importance of neither adding nor subtracting from God's “Law.” He demands strict adherence to the norms he catalogues ... and there's a lot to which the people of Israel must make their assent. He says to them, “You must observe [these ordinances] diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people?’”^v

See, during a time in which Israel would find itself in the near company of a people they did not know and who did not know them, Moses sets forth social conformity as the primary means of distinguishing itself and witnessing its relationship to God: by this, Israel will know themselves, and will make themselves known. And be clear, Moses does not intend blind or empty adherence. Even so, in that setting and at that time, he just as surely privileges following the law before any fidelity to those laws' *principles* that might allow an individual rule to be broken.

So, this very weekend way back then – that is, the weekend before my fifth-grade year began – my family returned to Monroe to visit my grandparents. And I was *so proud* of my new shoes, that I brought them with me. Understand: I did not *wear* these new shoes, because my mother would not allow me to risk ruining them before that first day.

[A quick digression: Friends, how many of you *right now* are enduring disappointment because your parents will not allow you to wear your awesome new clothes before your first day of school? Well, young people, be sure that clothes are made for wearing, not for saving.]

Like you might have done, I brought my new Chucks in their shoe box to display like a proud trophy for my grandmother. Then, on the way back to Shreveport that Sunday afternoon, a lump appeared in my throat – a hollow pit in my stomach – for just before we made it home, I realized ... [what did I realize?] ... that I had left that shoebox on Granny's kitchen counter.

Back in the Gospel of Mark, there's a Jesus who seemingly leaves behind all sorts of things, including the religious etiquette Moses had commended. This Jesus touches the lepers, feeds the hungry on the Sabbath, keeps company with the Gentiles, and, in today's lesson, does not rebuke his disciples for failing to follow the purity practices governing their food's handling.

In response to his rule-breaking ways, the Pharisees press Jesus, saying, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"^{vi} That is to say: *We have received the traditions of the generations who have raised us, and we know how to follow them. How can you call yourself Godly and yet live like this? Even worse, Teacher, how can you let your disciples live like this and allow themselves to be deluded into believing that they are Godly, too?*

In response, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah who warned of "people [who] draw near with their mouths and honor [God] with their lips, [and, yet, whose] hearts are far from [God], and [whose] worship [is] a human commandment learned by rote."^{vii} See, Jesus commends the Pharisees to give up their identities – which are not as Moses commended, but have become mere social conveniences – and to live with fidelity to the Torah principles' summary: "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind ... [and] to love your neighbor as yourself."^{viii}

Oh, yes: Jesus calls us to live by *love*.

Well, on Interstate 20 on the drive home from my grandparents, my heart was *cracked*, dashed, broken into a dozen brittle pieces of chalk dropped from the board. Lord – have mercy! – I unraveled, crying and blaming everybody:

“If only you had let me wear them!” I blubbered to my mother, “*They would be on feet right now!*”

“Why didn’t *you* pick them up!” I wheezed to my father, “*I’m only a child! I can’t remember so many things!*”

Despite my juvenile accusations (which likely would have received a severe talkin’-to in another context) when we got home, my mother called her mother, and the two conspired to have my sweet grandmother put my shoes on the next Greyhound bus out of Monroe. I remember going with my dad to the downtown station well after dark to pick up a stapled-shut, brown-paper bag with my Chuck Taylor’s inside, Granny’s distinctive pen announcing, “With love,” just above the fold. I fell asleep with them in my arms during the truckride home.

See, standing between my Monroe identity and this new Shreveport person I hoped to become – I wanted to get off on the right foot, as it were. Seeing myself through my new classmates’ eyes, I did not have sturdy confidence in who I was, and I was banking on those new shoes making the difference ... *shoes* making the difference.

Friends, as you begin a new academic year, I tell you what I wish I knew then, what, in my most faithful moments I manage to remember now: if there is a secret to enjoying childhood, adolescence, and your teenaged years (much less your adulthood) – listen to me! –I believe the secret is this: *be who you are ... trust who you are*. And let me tell you who you are.

You who stand at the edge of summer’s end and the first day of school: *do you know who you are?* **You are a child of the Living God.**

You who stand at the border of Elementary School and Junior High, of Junior High and High School, of High School and college: *do you know who you are?* **You are loved,** from before time and forever.

You who stand in that thicket of competing desires, of wanting to fit it, to find friends, to feel good about yourself in their eyes, and, yet, feeling and fearing that someone will see through you, see through those red shoes to all the inadequacies you work so hard to hide: *do you know who you are?* **You are enough.**

For all of us at Trinity Church, approaching (as always) the edge of some uncertain new season, we know who we are by our support of one another, by our reassurances that all are loved. We witness who are by loving well enough that all find reminder of the God who created, knows, and loves every hair on every sweet head. Yes! By Love we will know ourselves, by Love we will make our witness to the world, by Love we will step into this new school year.

Amen.

ⁱ Perhaps blessedly have those sweet grandchildren been returned: as one of my high-school teachers, Mrs. Flanagan, once said, to me, “I love you, baby, but you got to go.”

ⁱⁱ [A reflection on the Dagobah cave from starwars.com.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Patriots fans, heed Yoda’s warning: “Beware of anger, fear, aggression[, jealousy] ... consume you they will!”

^{iv} [“I don’t care what they’re going to say.”](#)

^v Deuteronomy 4:6.

^{vi} Mark 7:5.

^{vii} Isaiah 29:13.

^{viii} Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 22:37-39.