

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

The Reverend Morgan S. Allen

October 31, 2021

*All Souls*

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

You will likely know statistician Nate Silver's *Fivethirtyeight*, so named for the total number of electors in the college of voters for president and vice-president of these United States. Silver started the blog in 2008 and following his success predicting that cycle's presidential and down-ballot results, he agreed to a partnership with *The New York Times*. In 2013, Silver sold to ABC and ESPN, and he expanded the brand beyond politics. In addition to its continuing election staples, the site now explores everything from movies to sports, including "The Ultimate Halloween Candy Power Ranking," which they repost at this time every year (and righteously crown Reese Cups as the Trick-Or-Treat champ).

Soon after the move to ESPN, data journalist Mona Chalabi introduced *Fivethirtyeight*'s version of a "Dear Abby" column: "I'll help readers to answer [that] fundamental, burning question: Where do I fit in the world?"<sup>i</sup> ... *Where do I fit in the world?* She explained, "I am not a fan of advice columns in which the writer dispenses 'you shoulds' based on *her* experience. Instead, I'll offer [more neutral] *data* to contextualize *your* experience."<sup>ii</sup> Predictably, Ms. Chalabi, received inquiries of all kinds (many of the sort not asked in polite company), and, as promised, she offered her readers *numbers* as tools to better understand their place within the universe of polled and measured civilization.

For her final column, Chalabi took a fit-for-All-Souls question from twenty-seven-year-old Shannah of San Francisco. Shannah writes: "Dear Mona, Assuming that all who expire are promoted to a peaceful afterlife, what [are the current] demographics of heaven?"<sup>iii</sup> ... *what are the current demographics of heaven?*

Mona replies, "Dear Shannah, I don't know much about the afterlife, but that's OK since your question kind of boils down to: 'How many people have ever died?' ... it's a speculative estimate[, but] here's what I've got: roughly 100,825,272,791 people have ever died."<sup>iv</sup>

Chalabi based her answer on data from Carl Haub, a senior demographer at the Population Reference Bureau, or "PRB." She writes, "Haub ... has been researching demographics since the dawn of man (that's the scope of his research; he only began his work on this topic in the 1980s). He is one of many people looking to estimate a slightly different figure: the number of people who have ever *lived*."<sup>v</sup>

This May of 2021, Haub and the Population Reference Bureau estimated that 117 billion people have ever been born on Earth.<sup>vi</sup> Beginning with *two* sometime around 190,000 BC/E, for most of human history life expectancy at birth probably averaged only 10 years. “These short life expectancies meant the human population had a hard time increasing.”<sup>vii</sup> Those alive at the time of Jesus likely counted in the range of 300 million, but that metric would grow less than 50% during the next millennium.<sup>viii</sup>

Population growth then slowed even further, rising only 11% through the year 1650. Contributing to this comparatively slow increase, Haub notes that the bubonic plague “may have begun in western Asia [as early as] 542 and spread from there [to the 14<sup>th</sup>-century devastations in Europe with which we are more familiar.] Experts believe that half the Byzantine Empire was destroyed by plague in the sixth century[ – a] total of 100 million deaths”<sup>ix</sup> – leading to a period when the *birth* rate – though nearly five times its current pace<sup>x</sup> – could not keep up with the *death* rate of those years, resulting in the human population *decreasing* over time.

Thankfully, “advances in public health, medicine, and nutrition [soon allowed] more people to live far into their reproductive years.”<sup>xi</sup> As a result, the population would nearly triple in just two centuries, reaching 1.3 billion in 1850, and snowballing thereafter: doubling to 2.5 billion by 1950; more than doubling again to 5.8 billion by 1995; and increasing by another half in just the last 25 years.

Accounting this history, Chalabi explains to Shannah that the people of heaven, therefore, are younger than their living peers, and, despite contemporary urbanization trends, are likely to be quite “country”<sup>xii</sup> – demographics undermining the New England Church’s hope that the “life of the world to come” will be a series of symposia led by late middle-aged members of the Democratic Party.<sup>xiii</sup>

However dispassionate Chalabi’s response, the “Dear Mona” reader’s inquiry points to the deeply personal questions of life’s significance, those core existential curiosities: Can I really make a difference? ... Do I – only one – *really matter*?

See, if the inevitability is that we are all going to die – and, statistically, friends, that seems to be the inevitability – are our lives worth the effort, not just for our sake, but for the sake of others? Well, before we address the Gospel answer (and, spoiler alert, having been created in the image of God, your life is necessarily precious and significant, holy and good), take heart that the data reinforce a hopeful perspective.

See, the PRB estimates 7.8 billion people are alive today as we gather. This “means that approximately [7%] of everyone who has ever lived is alive [right now ... and, by 2050, when the population will have grown to 9.9 billion], 8.2% of everyone who has ever lived will [then] be alive.”<sup>xiv</sup> See, one does not have to be a banker to appreciate the dynamics of compound interest: in 1650, the dead outnumbered the living 200:1, but, by 2050, 1 of every 12 people who ever lived will be alive.

As when we launch our Stewardship campaign every year and wonder whether our single, financial pledge can *really* make a difference when our budget requirements seem so great, being part of a community comprising more than one-hundred billion can make a person feel insignificant. On the other hand, that we live among 7% of everyone who has ever lived ... well, that feels animating, inspiring!

As a data scientist might explain it, **today you have the potential to impact more people than anyone in the history of the world.** That's not the preacher's opinion, but a statistical fact. Indeed, before too many generations pass, even recent Christian witnesses like Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr, and Oscar Romero will have impacted more than half of all people *who have ever lived*. Therefore, the numbers themselves encourage us, like those saints, to invest in the good we can do, rather than despair what is beyond our influence.

Today we mark the Feast of All Souls, or "All Faithful Departed." Of this occasion, we recognize the New Testament's use of "the word 'saints' to describe the entire membership of the Christian community."<sup>xv</sup> Next Sunday, of course, we will celebrate All Saints' Day, yet, our Episcopal Church explains, "Beginning in the tenth century, it became customary to set aside another day — as a sort of extension of All Saints — on which the Church remembered that vast body of the faithful who, though no less members of the company of the redeemed, are unknown in the wider fellowship of the Church. It was also a day for particular remembrance of family members and friends."<sup>xvi</sup> We pray for all these dead, "because we still hold them in our love ... and our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>xvii</sup>

See (as previously noted), your life is precious and significant, holy and good, well beyond any numbers. And in recognizing the worth of all those billions who died in long-ago times and far-away places, and, much more personally, as we celebrate those members of our families and communities, our friends who have died before us, in pointing to God's care and hope for them, we point to God's care and hope for ourselves and for one another.

Friends, realize – and never forget – that among all the billions who ever have been, and all the billions who ever will be, there is only one you – only one! – and the God that created the child you have always been; who loves that child you still are; has loved you since before 190,000 BCE, from the very beginning of what was and is, and that God is going to love you *forever*, no matter what. And when this mortal life ends, we will continue in the nearer company of that same, good God.

For this reason, Jesus the Christ lived, and died, and rose again, and for this reason *every* life is worth living, and *every* life has value – in the demography of heaven and our own moment – all because God declared it to be so by creating the world with, and in, and for **Love**.

For this life, and for the life of the world to come,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Chalabi, Mona. “[Dear Mona, I’m 32 And Live With A Roommate, Am I Normal?](#)” fivethirtyeight.com. May 23, 2014. If you’re considering an adventure down this rabbit hole (and it’s a fun one!), [check out her last article as an introduction](#). The “Am I Normal” theme in many of the “Dear Mona” questions is another sermon (or ten).

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Chalabi, Mona. “[What Are The Demographics Of Heaven?](#)” fivethirtyeight.com. October 14, 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Kaneda, Toshiko and Carl Haub. “[How Many People Have Ever Lived On Earth?](#)” prb.org. May 18, 2021. The PRB totally sounds like a made-up government organization, like a credential of the *Men In Black*, or something (Will Smith reassuring a frightened citizen, “Ma’am, don’t worry. We’re working with the PRB.”)

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. The PRB article has a fascinating chart. Here, I reference that the estimated global population in 1000 was less than the 450,000,000 in 1200, the chart indicates.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid. 60 births per 1,000 v. 14 births per 1,000.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xii</sup> Chalabi, “What Are The Demographics Of Heaven?”

<sup>xiii</sup> A Halloween zinger!

<sup>xiv</sup> Here I update a sentence from Chalabi’s final article with Haub’s more recent information.

<sup>xv</sup> *Lesser Feasts & Fasts*, 412.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 862.