

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
February 19, 2023
Annual Parish Meeting

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.ⁱ *Amen.*

In my first sermon in this pulpit, I referenced “The Princess,” a 1973 Oldsmobile Sports Coupe that I bought with 21,000 miles on the odometer from a family in New Iberia, Louisiana in 1994.ⁱⁱ Each of its two doors stretched about 27’ long, and it could have fit most of Trinity across its backseat.ⁱⁱⁱ I invited the congregations that day to pile in: “Renewing while we drive and loving as we go buckle up! It’s gonna be a beautiful ride.”

Well, it has been that – “beautiful” – and it’s also been bumpier than any of us could have expected. Looking back, I might have anticipated as much.

After my family and I visited Trinity a month before that first Sunday, I arranged with the administrative staff to leave a suitcase of this-and-that in the room I would inherit as an office. The Director of Facilities gave me a key to the Rectory and the reassurance that the building would not be alarmed before we Allens were due to fly out of town.

In a whipping snowstorm very early that next morning, I drove the rental car to 233 Clarendon Street and parked outside. I pulled out of the trunk “Big Rickey” – the name given to our large, hard-shell, LSU-purple, checked-bag suitcase^{iv} – and I wheeled him to the front gate of the Rectory. I found the gate locked, and I had for it neither a key nor the double-top-secret, not-so-secure trick of reaching behind the latching mechanism to open it.

Studying my options, I decided I to powerlift one-million-pound Big Rickey over the wall before, channeling my inner Spiderman, I climbed the gate and carried on my business. Setting my coffee on the ledge and mustering both the strength and grace of a rhinoceros, I heaved the suitcase inside the stoop, scaled the wrought iron, and hopped to the front stairs [and that’s as much detail of that inelegant scene as you’re gonna get].

I picked up my coffee, blew away the melting flakes on its lip, and felt accomplished ... until I opened the door and heard the tell-tale beeping of an alarm about to sound. Hoping against hope that if I left the building again before the siren finished its countdown I might prevent members of Boston government from calling on me, Big Rickey and I tore up the stairs. Nevertheless, as I stepped into my office, the alarm began its piercing cry. I sighed.

I rolled the suitcase into the closet, took stock of the scene, and made my way back downstairs. By this time, the alarm had ceased screaming and only hissed, a noise that seemed to convey shame along with warning. I turned off the foyer lights and exited the building. Thankfully, from *this* side of the fence I could see the strange, small knob that opens that gate’s latch.

My heart still pumping at a considerable clip, I climbed back into the rental car and hustled through a green light at Newbury Street. Nearing Boylston, in my rearview mirror I could see through blowing snow the flashing red-and-blue lights of police cars turning off Commonwealth Ave onto Clarendon. Doing the 4:30AM math on the fly, I decided that running the yellow light before me was a better course than waiting to see if the fuzz had come to the Rectory looking for me. Lord, have mercy.^v

I would like say at this point, “And so it began,” but that would not be altogether true. “It” – the beauty and the bumps – were already underway.

On the one hand, that first teeming Sunday stirred real, hopeful energy; we parlayed its juju into a lively fall of consequential momentum and one of the best stewardship seasons in a generation. On the other hand, my first check from Trinity Church bounced, and I would find my office did not have so much as a desk chair or a computer when I arrived for work in April. On the one hand, parishioners of goodwill welcomed my family and me at a generous series of events in their homes, and, on the other, purposefully personal criticisms of the new rector came fast and frequent, commending everything from elocution lessons^{vi} to beard-grooming directives. On the one hand, our time at the Barbara C. Harris camp that first summer was warm and cohering, and, on the other, I inherited a parish budget with a \$290,000 shortfall, a built-in deficit despite its accounting for planned, partial-years staff transitions and a very large, non-renewing contribution from the capital campaign.^{vii}

See, as I pulled the Princess out of the driveway during that final pre-COVID April, I was already mashing the accelerator to outrun more than just the Boston PD; I recognized the parish could not operate with its extant resources, no matter how surging our attendance and pledging. From the moment I received the keys to the congregation,^{viii} circumstances demanded I downshift from strategic to crisis-driven leadership^{ix} – so it was in those days, and so it has remained since. Therefore, when we steered into March of 2020, the parish’s crisis was long underway from my seat behind the wheel.^x And parcel to the crisis was that the parish did not altogether recognize that we were in crisis.

Though blessedly without involuntary reductions, the staff had already winnowed from 31 full-time staff members to 17, and from 5 full-time clergy to 3,^{xi} a staggering 45% reduction in human resource. The crises, though, did not shake the strategic fiscal value I had chosen: to set us on *sustainable* financial footing; we replaced only one of those positions because we could afford to replace only one. While we identified efficiencies that could allow us to bring our ends close to meeting for a short time, when Trinity, along with the rest of the world, hit the yawning pothole of the pandemic, our suspension was already shot.^{xii} In this way, the pandemic distracted from the corrosion eating away at our undercarriage.

Now, I believe the parishioner leaders who kept the congregation going despite 15 years of steep, steady decline worked miracles. I have enormous gratitude and admiration for them; unequivocally, you should, too. And by the time we began ministry together, the duct tape and bailing wire was already giving way. The rust – kept mostly hidden underneath the Bondo and chrome Trinity has historically worked so hard to keep waxed and polished – had started to bubble at the surface [If we took a hammer to a screwdriver on those soft areas, we would have

lost the screwdriver; it would have pushed right through.] Yet the pandemic understandably redirected our membership's first attentions to the condition of the world: their worlds, Boston's, and the globe's.

While we have still not cleared our financial troubles by any means, in the last four years we have retired some \$4M of inherited debt, and we are now, entirely, debt free. Moreover, a commitment to intergenerational equity drives every micron of our budgeting, our operating, and our long-term planning. We prioritized Trinity Boston Connects' application for Payroll Protection funds, and I have been honored to work closely with TBC's board and executive team to finalize their strategic plan and negotiate the pandemic. In the parish, we avoided the PPP cliff staring down so many of our compatriot churches, and we have finally renewed our organizational chart, a process that took an unusually long time following a new rectorate – a long time because we undertook it with generosity and an unflinching commitment to honor the long-serving staff for whom the parish felt such devotion. Our current team, being lighter as a collective, offers gifts – different than those of our predecessors, yet exciting, even if we can't possibly cover all the ground that a staff double our size could.

Along this bumpy way we have made other important systemic progresses, as well.

Strategically, my first year focused on Sunday worship as the engine of our common life. Rooted in the second chapter of Acts,^{xiii} we consolidated the two sparsely attended mid-morning services into one hour of worship that could gin energy from the pews, not just the chancel and pulpit. The herculean work of building that case and coordinating it ... made way for only a few weeks of the shift before COVID arrived.^{xiv} Despite that abrupt redirection, upon our regathering for outdoor worship in the summer of 2021 – and the incremental move indoors that fall – we kept to this Sunday focus. Advantaging what the pandemic safely allowed and what our depleted staff could most sustainably deliver, we gradually incorporated into this rhythm the pastoral offices – baptisms, funerals, and weddings, in that order.

While for most of a year we had steered faithfully toward a 2021 Advent-Christmas season to bring us back together most fully since before the pandemic began ... the Omicron variant compelled another detour. No matter, we shook its dust off our feet and kept to the main road for Candlelight Carols, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day, even if with more COVID concessions than expected. We did not – and will not again, God willing – return exclusively to remote worship. Though deferred a few more months, our (re-)re-gathering continued post-Omicron. We restored a range of engaging, in-person Sunday formation opportunities, in a variety of formats, from small-group to lecture-based, and for all ages.

Related to this Sunday emphasis and that Acts of the Apostles model, at my arrival we also began to prioritize community for community's sake. Appreciating being “Known and Loved” as a Gospel value, we launched Parish Breakfasts to bring the congregation together with no agenda other than breaking bread and telling tales. This priority announced the conviction that we change the world beyond our walls, by building a Beloved Community within our walls. If you are looking for Cliff's Notes to these last four years of sermons, I have preached that message unrelentingly, so hear it again this morning: *we change the world beyond our walls, by building a Beloved Community within our walls.*

Though I underestimated how counter-intuitive this ethos would feel for some, be sure: the necessity of nurturing an immediate Beloved Community is not just “what Morgan thinks,” this is what Jesus did!^{xv} And the failure of New England’s mainline denominations’ build-a-loving-and-healthy-church-by-guest-speakers-and-political-advocacy strategy preaches itself,^{xvi} sounding an alarm as clear as that Rectory’s siren. If we want the world to become more loving, then we must love God and love one another more and better every day – there is no other way; reorder that chronology and the world’s meannesses will become our own.

This affirmation of community has also made progress in renewing our congregational culture. A decade-and-a-half of decline takes its toll and does not always bring out the best in us. Despite those headwinds, our daily trades of commiseration for joy, triangulation for sincerity, and criticism for curiosity are making a difference. Though habits die hard (and the old circuitry always lays in wait), our fresh disposition is changing hardwired negativity. Take heart and keep at it, Beloved! For in every congregation that aspires joy for itself and the world, “the solution to pollution is dilution.”^{xvii}

So, having sturdied our Sunday and pastoral-liturgy systems into a repeatably excellent operation; having made our financial footing more sustainable and more sure; having deepened our sense of community and reestablished our lifelong Formation; the impacts of our smoother running now show. **Thanks be to God, our in-person attendance since last September is up 34% over the same period in the previous Program Year – 34%!**^{xviii} Now that’s an increase we and the Holy Spirit can work with.

While we rebuilt the engine in all these ways and more, the Task Force on Justice & Reparations worked to restore our ministry frame. Its fact, its work, and its report ([published last summer](#)) exposed parish mythologies and fortified us to grapple our history of race and racism more fully. Crucially, *the Task Force undertook its work in a spirit that loved our institution beyond its brokenness*, setting our love for one another and Trinity’s endurance as guiding compass points. This approach resonates with the hottest, emerging edge of anti-racism work that pushes back on the tyranny of “maximalists” who consider “anything less than the most idealistic position ... [as] evidence of corruption, cowardice, lack of commitment or vision,” and who “[righteously refuse] to engage with people who do not already share [their] views and values.”^{xix} Instead of such puritanism, the Task Force aspired a Beloved Community for *everyone*: a constructive, generous welcome for *all* to live and love with us, whoever they are, wherever they are. We will continue our justice ministry in this spirit and with this substance.

Finally, the Leadership Development Task Force, launched in 2020; and the Ministry Collaborative, launched in 2021; hammered away at Trinity’s decades-long siloing. The best-practices identified by the LDTF – expecting leaders to “faithfully work, pray, and pledge for God’s reign,” asking ministries to articulate descriptions of their work, and establishing term limits for leaders and members – have helped heal the corrosive idea that every ministry position is an entitlement that continues forever as a lifetime appointment. I regret some have felt the abrasions of this essential sanding. I hope that all will take heart that we are already stronger for this undertaking, better equipped to welcome new leaders and to support our collective ministry.

See, while the crises we have faced required us to work more *ad hoc* than anyone's preference, we still brought to that necessity all these priorities and principles. Though our beautiful ride could not be either as smooth or as orderly as we would have chosen, strategic values still drove our responsiveness to the crises as they arrived. This means we now have many of the tools (these sustainable structures we've been building) and mechanics (our renewed staff, parish leaders – *and you!*) already onboard to continue the work. As we look more daringly beyond the pandemic and continue the parish's restoration, we ready to encourage and equip one another so that we can grow the church again.

To do this, we will launch the Ministry Council in the year to come.

The Ministry Council – about which you can read in the Leadership Development Task Force's report^{xx} – will include two parishioner leaders from each of six parish Councils – Infrastructure, Lifelong Formation, Outreach & Justice, Welcome & Parish Life, Pastoral Care, and Worship – in addition to support from other senior staff and me. Each of these Councils, partnered with members of our Program and Administrative Staffs, will convene with leaders of those resonant ministries they comprise.

In the next two months, members of the staff and your new Vestry will continue the LDTF's and Collaborative's work of charting every known Trinity program and committee into the Council structure. We will identify which ministry gaps we need to fill immediately by the creation of a new or renewed committee or program. Based on the feedback we have already received from you, we will help identify ministries that have reached their conclusion and nurture them to sunset. We will brainstorm opportunities to support, reinforce, and diversify existing rosters. And, before mid-fall, we will invite all ministry members – and all those interested in becoming more involved – to come together; to get to know one another; to share in worship and a common meal; to learn more about this structure; and to continue the Councils' assembly.

The organization will help us move beyond our Sunday-worship focus – yet, as anyone who has driven Boston streets will know, bumps will remain inevitable along our way ... no matter how expert the driver and no matter how reinforced our suspension. I also expect this stretch of the boulevard will surface more tendernesses from the changes of these last years, perhaps especially from ministries left unminded or undersupported as a result of our staff shortage. As I foreshadowed that long-ago Sunday, this will mean we continue to restore this Trinity Church *while we drive it*. And doing those two things at once will require grace and generosity from all of us – a minimum of backseat obstreperousness, friends! – actioning our Beloved Community values as the benefit of the doubt.

With this graciousness, we can finally refuse crisis-driven calendars ... because we will know that everyone is doing the very best that they can. We can keep to the highest roads of Beloved Community ... because we will love one another beyond any single offense. We can decline quick fixes that defer systemic repair ... because we will trust that we are all in this work and at it together. We can build a functional organization of coordinated, sustainable ministry for our generation and for all those to come.

Trinity Church, I have never been more hopeful than I am right now! We are just at the edge of a vital and exciting season.

So, I say to you once more: “Buckle up!” It’s gonna be a beautiful ride.

With gladness and singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ From Psalm 31.

ⁱⁱ Having hobbled with old cars during my years before we had children, I’ve owned a 60ish vehicles at this point in my life. There have been some fun ones: the 1983 CJ-7 Jeep from high school; Missy’s sporty, two-seater, standard-shift Accord; the 1972 Buick GS-350 convertible I drove during seminary. Even so, of all those cars I would first welcome back The Princess. At the time I sold it, I was ready to move on because she wasn’t a Cutlass. In the same way I now look back on the Buick Wildcats as under-appreciated (and ginormous) automobiles, that Oldsmobile was a very pretty car, and it could still hustle if that’s what you needed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Though not a Chrysler, Fred Schneider would certainly have declared it “as big as a whale!”

^{iv} “Little Rickey” being the smaller, carry-on suitcase that came in the Costco set.

^v This story is 100% true, up to and including the police cars turning from Commonwealth Ave. I couldn’t imagine they had come for me, but I wasn’t going to take a chance and find out.

^{vi} ... hoping to take that drawl out of my mouth. The force and timing of these criticisms – veiled and unveiled – remains remarkable to me. The openness I offered as we were getting to know one another was met – by some – with an energy resembling that [Geico “Aunt Infestation” commercial](#).

^{vii} All of this is also 100% true ... and just the tip of the iceberg that can be shared in polite company.

^{viii} As previously noted: most of them, anyway!

^{ix} I mean to distinguish between the opportunity to chart a mid- to long-term plan and laboring to achieve it (strategic leadership), and the necessity to address one urgency after another, effectively becoming prisoner to the revolving most immediate needs (crisis leadership). For four years, every day I have measured who can most tolerate disappointment and what can hold well enough for now, and I have triaged my Outlook calendar accordingly. Trinity’s tendency to mark every concern as urgent leaves few tasks – no matter how important – receiving our leadership’s best effort. We cannot linger on restoring the car’s interior (or repairing the vinyl roof, or replacing the tires) if the engine is on fire.

^{xx} I would date the acute crisis to 2005, though some would date it to the declining attendance of the late 1960s.

^{xi} The 31 and 5 counts were from 2017.

^{xii} Probably on Stuart Street, the worst “paved” road in North America.

^{xiii} Among other highlights: “Peter said to the [faithful from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem], ‘... The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.’ ... So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added. **They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.** Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

^{xiv} [Here is a testimony to the thoughtfulness and thoroughness of those efforts](#) – from which we now benefit.

^{xv} Pointing to the Gospel stories broadly is enough, though I am especially drawn to the intimacy of John 13, when Jesus gathers the disciples, washes their feet, and commends them to love one another.

^{xvi} [This sermon from Pentecost 2021 pointed to the data.](#)

^{xvii} Go-to advice of the Rt. Rev. Dena A. Harrison, retired Bishop Suffragan of Texas, and my former neighbor in Austin. Bishop Harrison was a great resource to me when we were working the Central Texas vineyard together, and her sage counsel and steady strength remain bread for my journey.

^{xviii} From the first Sunday after Labor Day through the second Sunday of February, 2021-2022, as compared to 2022-2023: '21-22, 370 in-person and '22-23, 494 in-person. That 494 is 76% of our 2019 ASA, excluding Easter and Candlelight Carols/Messiah (647). Once we cross Easter in a couple months, we will add those numbers to the pre/post-COVID percentage tracking.

^{xix} Mitchell, Maurice. "Building Resilient Organizations." *The Forge*. November 29, 2022. Among other credentials of his righteousness, Mitchell's cousin was [MF-DOOM](#), Daniel Dumile. "Tyranny" and "Puritanism" are my words, not Mitchell's.

^{xx} [The Leadership Development Task Force's report.](#)