

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

May 15, 2022

V Easter, John 13:31-35 (15:1-17)

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

It's hot this weekend, Bostonians! Not just warm-for-spring, but sweating-in-your-living-room, *for-real* hot.ⁱ

This heat wave has me thinking summer thoughts: thoughts about mixed tapes and sunburns, road trips and rollercoasters, flip-flops and Push-Ups (the delicious, orange-sherbet kind, not the strenuous ones). See, when the Kingdom finally comes, I believe that the Kingdom will come in summer,ⁱⁱ when it's *hot*. I'm not talking that stuffy, muggy heat *inside* my house (or inside *this* house), I'm talking *outside* heat, *beach* heat, with a little harbor breeze blowing underneath our sunglasses ... in that happily dehydrated haze of frosty beverages ... when existence pulls thin and for the first time in a long time, we "adjust the bass and let the Alpine blast,"ⁱⁱⁱ our troubles drifting a little farther away than the day before.

I root this reckoning of the future in my remembering of the past, for I believe the Kingdom of God was Registration Day at Camp Hardtner – *Camp Hardtner*, that Diocese of Western Louisiana program where I met The Episcopal Church along with Mark and Andrew (not the apostles, but two guys from Baton Rouge) – where I encountered the risen Jesus; felt the power of the Holy Spirit; recognized that I had a place in the Body of Christ; and I experienced *Love*, *Joy*, and the arrival of God's Heaven, over and over and over again, on all the Registration Days that followed.

My wife, Missy, and I met when we were high-school campers, and the two of us continued dating through four years as members of the "Permanent Staff," those college-aged counselors who lived and worked together the length of the summer. And before the very last session of the very last summer that Missy and I spent together on staff, I dropped to one knee on the concrete slab of the Arts and Crafts shack and proposed to her right where she had served every one of those years as the Arts and Crafts counselor. You can't make it up! It's true, and it wasn't just good, it was very, very good – full of *Love* and full of *Joy*.

Yes, the Kingdom of God was Registration Day at Camp Hardtner, when camper-filled cars and vans and buses queued in a procession between the simple concrete pillars set on either side of Camp Hardtner Road, just east of Louisiana State Highway 165. The fancy girls from McGehee's School on Prytania Street in New Orleans rolled up in their leather-clad coaches, and the rowdy children from Tioga, and Winnsboro, and Tallulah, jumped out the back of their daddy's pickup trucks, their ways paid by the ECW scholarship fund at a church they'd never attended. There were East Texas Republicans from Toledo Bend, and South Louisiana Democrats from Thibodeaux; there were LSU Tigers and (bless their hearts) even Texas A&M Aggies; aunties^{iv} and Parans;^v old people and young people and everybody in-between people.

And no one could contain their exuberance on Registration Day: Who will be in my cabin? Will *he* be here? Will *she* be here? Four-square and all-camp swims, Capture The Flag and Morning Prayer at the outdoor chapel ... with another school year blessedly put to rest, camp had finally arrived, and with it, *Love* and *Joy* – generous, deep, and unguarded – had come.

As the Kingdom of God was Registration Day at Camp Hardtner, so, too **the Kingdom of God is this Sunday at Trinity Church in the City of Boston!** Hear me, Trinitarians, because *here ... we ... come*: on the Orange Line and the Green Line and driving that yellow line, from Malden and Medford, Wellesley and Weston, Roxbury and right down the street. Through jet-engine winds on Saint James and all manner of traffic interruptions (including the closed Copley Square exit on the Mass Pike this month), here we come! Pushing strollers and pulling oxygen tanks, arriving alone and rolling with some neighbors, we come for the first time, and we come because our mama brought us here in that time before we can remember, occasions too varied and too many to count.

The Kingdom of God is this Sunday at Trinity Church in the City of Boston, and, at our best, we break out the Dentyne before the West Doors: ready for *Love* as we arrive; ready for *Joy* as we greet guests and tourists and visitors and friends. With the incalculable blessing of saying our prayers in one of the most beautiful worship spaces on planet earth, we come to hear the old words echo against this plaster and glass, to sing the old songs, and to hold our troubles a little more loosely than the day before – not for escape, but for renewal, even *resurrection*. And if we do not experience God’s reign here – generous, deep, and unguarded *Love* and *Joy*, over and over and over again – then we must labor faithfully until we do.

From those days at Camp Hardtner to this morning on Copley Square, I am clear that God has called me to seek ever greater generosity in *my* life, and to call others to ever greater generosity in *their* lives. As a lay professional and as a priest, I have now served seven parishes across four dioceses, three states, and 28 years, and while neither I nor those I have served have fulfilled God’s highest hopes for us, yet (we’re all still working on it!), be sure that in every one of those settings – including this one – we have sought to love more and to judge less, to trade haughtiness for hopefulness, commiseration for cooperation, fearfulness for friendship. And depending upon the context, love’s requirement has varied.

In my experience of the Deep South, The Episcopal Church occupies a *polite* space among its Christian neighbors. Offended by the vulgar politics of the Southern Baptists and uneasy with the enthusiasm of the Methodists, southern Episcopalians offer liturgical beauty, doctrinal generosity, and delicious potlucks. Within a largely church-going culture, “mega-church” peers pressure even our healthiest southern parishes to provide *this* program or *that* program, *this* study or *that* study a parishioner’s neighbor heard enthusiastically described in the beauty parlor or at the office park.^{vi} With a growing church always nearby, this pressure can narrow southern congregations to focus too much on their own wellbeing as the essential work of their calling ... often with the unintended consequence of tacitly accepting the structures and situations of their neighborhoods, the conditions of their broader communities. Therefore, greater generosity calls these parishes *outside* their walls.

Here in New England, The Episcopal Church occupies an *orderly* space among our Unitarian-Universalist and Roman-Catholic neighbors. Aspiring a “thinking Christianity,” we, like our Southern siblings, also prefer our worship well-organized and elegantly prayed, seasoned with a dash of “mindfulness.” Within a largely secular culture, partisan political organizations pressure even our healthiest New England parishes to take *this* public action or *that* public action, to make *this* public statement or *that* public statement a parishioner found compellingly penned in a nearby congregationalist church’s Facebook post.^{vii} Surrounded by dying congregations, this pressure convinces Episcopal parishes that only secular partisanship will keep the Church alive and relevant, with the unintended consequence of neglecting the quality and character of *our* life as a community. Therefore, greater generosity calls these parishes *inside* their walls.^{viii}

At today’s 11:15 Adult-Formation Forum, our Task Force on Justice and Reparations will offer the third of three programs anticipating the publication of its report next month. In this morning’s session, we will discuss what we have heard and what we have felt as we have considered how God calls us to endeavor reparation for the harm caused by anti-Black racism in our past and in our present, whether purposeful, tacit, or complicit. All are welcome today, whether you attended either, neither, or both of the first two installments.

In support of the Task Force’s work, my recent sermons have sought to distinguish the Church’s ministries of anti-racism from those of secular organizations:

On Easter Sunday, I drew upon Luke-Acts and named that **we at Trinity confront tyranny and supremacy culture with our support of the institutional Church**. While secular organizers often seek the destruction of institutions, we organize to renew and strengthen our outpost of Christ’s enduring Body.

Last week, I drew upon the Good Shepherd’s call and named that while secular organizations may require anti-racism practices, they often undertake that work as loveless “map reading.”^{ix} For us in the Church, Love always remains our Christ-inspired priority and the ultimate telos for which we “explore.” That is, **we in the Church seek to realize a post-racist, Beloved Community** for the sake of God’s hopes, not merely to complete an anti-racism exercise for our own, interim ends.

This morning’s reading from the Gospel of John overlaps the narrative we heard on Maundy Thursday, when Jesus washes his disciples’ feet and delivers a new commandment, “that [we] love one another.”^x Distinct from the Holy Week passage, today’s appointment includes the conclusion of that story, when Jesus focuses his commission with a purpose: “*By this* everyone will know that you are my disciples” ... *By this*, “if you have love for one another.”^{xi}

Reinforcing last week’s message, **this call to Love moves us at Trinity Church from the missional, to the tactical, and sharpens our congregation’s focus on loving each other – calls us *within* our walls – before all else**. Our love for one another marks us as Christian, and, without love, we not only lack a public witness, but we cannot claim ourselves as Jesus’ disciples. According to Jesus’ call, then, the reparations we endeavor must strengthen us to love more and to love better all our immediate neighbors.

As the Jesus of John's Gospel continues encouraging his friends, he reiterates his new *mandatum* and explicitly names joy as essential to Beloved Community: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love ... I have said these things to you *so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*"^{xii} Jesus inaugurates a Beloved Community centered in *Love* and aimed for *Joy*!

Like the southern Church's suspicion of liberal politics in the pulpit, we at Trinity have become suspicious of joyful community in our pews: questioning its propriety, doubting its sufficiency, arguing its necessity. Yet, before we can faithfully or effectively labor to realize God's reign beyond our campus, we must witness *Love* and *Joy* in our life as a parish family.

Therefore, we must dare summer thoughts! And we must not leave our joy outside the Church's doors. If we are failing to share the Good News joyfully, then we are simply failing, for when we do not seek joy, we concede the world's condition to the greedy and the divisive, the racist and the violent.^{xiii} **The reparations we endeavor must not only strengthen us to love more and to love better, but must make our joy complete.**

Trinitarians, we nurture a more loving, more joyful community not as any myopic indulgence, but as the primary sign of God's hope for the whole world, the fundamental ministry for which God made us. With optimism integral to our opposition – not injuriously blithe, but faithfully believing – by our hope-filled reparations we will encounter the risen Jesus; feel the power of the Holy Spirit; recognize that every one of us has a place in the Body of Christ; and – indeed! – the Kingdom of God will come to Trinity Church Sunday after Sunday, over and over and over again, with generous, deep, and unguarded *Love* and *Joy*.

For the life of the world to come;
Amen.

ⁱ The high temperature Saturday set a record for the hottest May 14 in the recorded history of Boston.

ⁱⁱ Does anyone really picture "the fulfillment of time" coming to pass during winter?

ⁱⁱⁱ Yes.

^{iv} Not just your mama's sister, your *favorite* aunt, she is both like a sibling and a mentor, an advocate and protector.

^v Cajun word for godfather.

^{vi} Lord, have mercy: always the suggestions.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Some sweeping generalizations in these two paragraphs, which I intend with good humor, as well as truth. Exceptions and variations are, of course, plentiful.

^{ix} As noted last week, even when we describe the work of secular businesses, institutions, and governments as "godly" because we identify resonances with our own loving labor, their work is not about God's hopes for the

world, but the goals of their organization. With this observation I do not intend to dismiss their missions as unimportant, I simply intend to distinguish them from that of the Church – our goals are necessarily different.

^x John 13:34.

^{xi} John 13:35.

^{xii} John 15:9-12.

^{xiii} I prepared to preach this sermon as unapologetically and unrelentingly joyful, a witness in spirit to the message's substance and Jesus' "so that [our] joy may be complete." I then learned of the May 14 shooting in Buffalo, NY, after I had completed the text. In the wee hours before the early service on Sunday morning, I worked to temper more soberly the sermon's tone and content, leaning it again toward Jesus' call for us to love one another, while still not granting our condition to the action of hateful terrorists. The result was a longer message than usual that included two main points, rather than only one.