

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

Sunday, August 7, 2022

IX Pentecost

Luke 12:32-40

Come Holy Spirit, and kindle in the hearts of your faithful the fire of your love. *Amen.*

On February 16, 1922, the New York Times reported that Babe Ruth, despite a contract dispute, would leave for the Yankees' early spring training in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Ruth had first visited Hot Springs as a member of the Red Sox some ten years before (in those halcyon days before the Curse of the Bambino), and he believed in the powers of the natural thermal springs flowing from Hot Springs Mountain. He, along with politicians and celebrities from Franklin Roosevelt to Al Capone, helped make Hot Springs one of the most popular domestic vacation destinations during the first half of the twentieth century.ⁱ

Concerned about the arrival of urbanizing profiteers one-hundred years before, Congress established Hot Springs as a national reservation in 1832, the first federally protected property in the governmental structure anticipating the National Park Service. The reservation intended to guard the forty-seven natural springs which gushed, uninterrupted, nearly one-million gallons of 143-degree water *every day*. Between 1890 and 1923, developers created Bathhouse Row, a series of eight resorts in Hot Springs' downtown. These resorts annually hosted hundreds of thousands of guests who visited the area for the springs and lavish spa treatments.

In elaborately tiled basements as wide as Trinity's central nave, guests would bathe in the spring waters, within private stalls positioned all along its perimeter, and in large, communal pools centering several of these rooms. Upstairs, visitors spent time in bowling alleys and large gymnasiums with cutting edge exercise equipment (imported from as far away as Sweden) for the rehabilitation work doctors prescribed along with the curative waters. Naturally fed steam rooms and steam cabinetsⁱⁱ provided space to recover and relax following workouts, and guests would drink generously of the natural elixir as they reclined together.

However, faced with changing attitudes toward public baths and beset with illegal gambling and prostitution in the years following World War II, Hot Springs' resort industry declined precipitously. The Fordyce Bathhouse closed in 1962, followed by the Maurice, the Ozark, and the Hale during the 1970's. The Quapaw and the Superior closed in 1984, and the Lamar closed the following year. On the Row today, only The Buckstaff still operates as a bathhouse.

Now, before we consider ourselves too far evolved from the presidents and baseball stars who sought Hot Springs as preparation for their upcoming seasons, consider Lush, just around the corner on Newbury Street, or the more ubiquitous Bath & Body Works, enduring in suburban shopping centers from coast to coast. After church today, one can visit these brick-and-mortar retailers and choose from aroma therapy combinations to optimize the home bathing experience. On The Interwebs, I learned of their ginger scents for concentration and eucalyptus extracts for relaxation; bubbling salts for muscle soreness and murky jells for exciting the immune system – all to be added to a hot bath (specifically defined in the directions as “a tub three-quarters full of water at 100-104 degrees Fahrenheit”) and to be accompanied by “positive thoughts for a period of twenty to thirty-five minutes.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Indeed, we still believe in the old magic of water ... and in our worship today we reiterate its power in the sacrament of baptism.

During this liturgical year (the third, or “C” in our three-year cycle), our assignments weave us through Luke’s Gospel, including those commissions for faithful priorities we just heard: to avoid wasting energy on mortal fears, and to trust instead in God’s “good pleasure;” to invest in righteousness, rather than in rapaciousness; and to make ourselves fit and ready for the reign of Christ we seek to inaugurate.^{iv} These calls continue the last two months of teachings,^v charges to focus on the fulfillment of God’s hopes, rather than fleeting relief of our desires.

This morning we welcome seven children into the household of God, inviting them to live in a community ordered by these Gospel values: where we dare believe Love more powerful than cruelty and death; where we set our neighbor’s wellbeing before our own; where we recognize human frailty and practice mercy with ourselves and one another; where we live generously and peaceably and labor for a just world; and where we inherit oil, light, and *water* as marks of this way of life.

These days, the Fordyce bathhouse in Hot Springs serves as the National Park Service’s Welcoming Center for the area, and visitors can tour the Art Deco building. In the ceiling of the first-floor men’s bathing room, an enormous, 8,000-piece, Tiffany-styled, stained-glass window glows above the communal pool. Named, “Neptune’s Daughters,” the window depicts three mermaids swimming around a bright blue orb. When the pool is calm and when light shines through this window above it, reflections of the mermaids swim in the water, its surface a rippling canvas, imaging the magic and hopefulness of the hot springs as mythological maidens.

God calls us to be as humble as the carpenter’s son and to offer ourselves for the good of the baptismal community and in service of God’s hopes for the whole cosmos. Parcel to this calling, we invite others into the baptism we share, a holy responsibility we realize today. And God calls all people – the baptized and the baptizands, parents and godparents, friends and family – *to be like water*: like the waters of the Jordan, reflecting the Creator’s face as Jesus prayed ... like the waters of this font, reflecting the hope-filled countenances of the children we receive ... and like these lives we lead, reflecting a love for our neighbors as ourselves. Indeed, in our common

baptism and in our common prayer, God calls us to become a rippling canvas, imaging the righteous power and hope of the One who made us, who saved us, and who sustains us, still.

For the life of the world to come,
Amen.

ⁱ Just after my wife and I married, I served as a lay chaplain to the cathedral school (K3-8th Grade) in our home diocese. As part of that ministry, every year I chaperoned the middle-schoolers on their spring field trips: the 6th Grade for two days and a night in Vicksburg and Jackson; the 8th Grade for a full school week in South Louisiana; and the 7th Grade for three days and two nights in Hot Springs.

As much as I love my native Louisiana and those adventures along its southern coast, the Hot Springs trip was my favorite. The big bath houses were mostly empty at that time and visiting “Bathhouse Row” could feel a little like walking through one of those abandoned amusement parks. Arkansans chose “The Natural State” as Arkansas’ tagline, and I can’t disagree: its territory is an especially beautiful – and underappreciated – part of the country.

Most of these details I recall in the sermon I draw from my several tours of the area and from the few brochures and guidebooks that have managed to drift from one filing cabinet to the next.

ⁱⁱ These “cabinets” – wood-and-metal cubes – look like something out of a Houdini act. With two holes for one’s feet, two for their arms, and a hole for their head, hinges ran behind the guest’s spine. The cube would open, the patron would sit on a stool inside, and then an attendant would close the contraption just under its captive’s chin. No thank you!

ⁱⁱⁱ I love the explicit instruction to accompany one’s bath with “positive thoughts” for a prescribed period. I’m feeling like my accompanying most any activity with a half-hour of positive thoughts will prove beneficial.

^{iv} Luke 12:32-40.

^v [Last week I traced the lectionary texts’ trajectory since July 3.](#)