

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

September 12, 2022

XIV Pentecost (Proper 19, Year C), Luke 15:1-10

*God of Grace, God of Love, show us the path of life;
for in your presence there is fullness of joy and delights forevermore. Amen.*

Leaning into both my middle-age and our yankee environs, I recently replaced the battery in my seasoned iPhone rather than buy one of those new-fangled models announced this week.¹ As another sign of doddering-ness, I took seriously Apple’s “in-rare-instances” warning message that the repair could wipe the device of all my personal bits and bytes. Therefore, I prepared for this big event by backing-up years of photographs from the phone and, in the process, updating my cloud storage accounts.

All this went fine, just fine ... except for the unintended consequence of “Memories” (that’s a capital “M” formal name, property of Microsoft Corp) which now pop-up on my monitor in the middle of the workday. Many will know of this phenomenon from one platform or another, when a notification box *blurps* into the lower right of one’s screen, presenting a random photograph from the same date in a previous year. Most of the time, these images deliver further testimony to my season of life and are of a decidedly unmoving sort: a screenshot I did not intend to snap; the price tag of some something I intended to reference later; a color-coded garage sign to remind me where I parked.

Then on one August afternoon, an emotionless Windowⁱⁱ inquired, “Do you remember today in 2010?” And ohhh, I did.

During our children’s elementary-school years, I would serve for a summer week as “Chaplain” at the Episcopal camp and conference center in the Diocese of Texas. As Chaplain, I led daily Morning and Evening Prayer, at 7:30 and 5:00, respectively. My family and I would spend the rest of our time swimming in the center’s several pools, hiking through its woods, and hovering over the coffee table in our cabin where we would assemble 1,500-piece puzzles and recount the day’s fun.

The photograph that appeared on my computer a few weeks back showed my two children, ages 6 and 4, standing beside a swimming pool. With sun-reddened cheeks and their arms around each other, they tented under a single towel and made purposefully silly faces – silly faces of the guileless kind that only six- and four-year-olds can make, before the world convinces us that silly faces are not the sort of thing that grown-up, well people do.

With Mary Virginia summing her sixteenth birthday and Michael Stephens finishing an internship before his senior year – *senior year!* – of high school, I did just want the algorithm wanted me to do: I clicked into that long-ago folder ... and – *Lord, have mercy* – it absolutely wrecked me.

Our three-year lectionary cycle not only prescribes our readings, but assigns the “Collect of the Day,” that first prayer we bid following our opening hymn, dialogue, and Gloria. These petitions “collect” the intentions of a given Sunday, whether according to the calendar week (as in “The Fourth Sunday of Lent”), or according to an occasion like the one we celebrate today: the first Sunday of our 2022-2023 Program Year [Woohoo!]. Given today’s kickoff, we offer the collect “For the Unity of the Church,” a prayer that tethers to the bookends of Jesus’s gathering with his friends for their last supper together.

If you would like to follow along in one of those bibles from the pew in front of you, turn with me to the thirteenth chapter of John’s Gospel (page 82 in most editions), where the moving Maundy Thursday scene begins: Jesus washing his disciples’ feet and delivering a new commandment, that they – *and we* – “would love one another.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus sharpens this commission with a purpose, one that points beyond their fellowship. Continuing at verse 35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,”^{iv} or, in the words of this evening’s prayer, “Grant that your Church[may be] bound together in love ... that the world may believe.”^v Jesus makes clear that the Love *within* our community declares God’s Love *beyond* our community.

Inching ahead to chapter 15, Jesus continues his encouragement of his friends before his Passion, reiterating his new *mandatum* and explicitly naming *joy* as the purpose of their Beloved Community. Beginning at verse 9: “As the Father has loved me, [I] have loved you; 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.”^{vi} While *externally* our love for one another participates in God’s Love for all people, *internally* – *within* these walls – God intends our love for one another *to bring us joy*, and not joy only, but “fullness” of joy, joy’s *completion*.

Finally, this long scene nears its conclusion in chapter 17 (which begins in the lower-left of the facing page, and we will begin with verse 20), Jesus offers prayer for his chosen family that he realizes he must leave. And while Jesus might have righteously prayed for any of seemingly innumerable, enduring ills – for the healing of all disease, for peace among the nations, for a just world, or even release from his own demanding fate – he chooses instead to pray for his friends and their bonds of Beloved Community: “[Father, I ask that] they may all be one ... the glory that you have given me, I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one.”^{vii}

In support of those he loves continuing the mission they inaugurated together – declaring God’s Love *beyond*, living in joy *within* – **Jesus prays that we would be “one,” our togetherness – our unity – the synergizing force of God’s cosmic hopes.** See, we will have love for one another *because we spend time together*; we will have joy *because we spend time together*. The time together comes first, that’s the way it works – the only way it works.^{viii} Among the Legion consequences of these 30 pandemic months, perhaps none has proven greater and more damaging than the time we – necessarily, understandably – spent apart from one another. Our solitude and our silos have increased our reactivity and diminished our grace, tested our love and siphoned our joy.

Well get ready, Trinity Church, because with **Gladness and Singleness of Heart**, we have *love* in our midst and *joy* on the way!

Clicking through that folder of photographs last month, image after image of my family's week together more than a decade ago filled my heart so full of love and gratitude I could barely breathe. All the small moments – docking the canoes, lighting the chapel candles, playing our favorite board games^{ix} – anticipated the lightest and heaviest days ahead with the same innocence and sincerity as those – *blurp* – silly faces. The photographs showed us still shielded from life's harder, coming truths, the way Michael and Ginna had hidden themselves from the sun under that oversized towel. Yet the very love we were covenanting and the time we were investing in one another was what would give us strength for the challenges ahead – and, I pray, will strengthen us for all those beyond the next horizon, too.

People of God, our life together as a Church can feel like this, can *be* like this – a chosen family loving one another *easily*, living together *joyfully*. We can choose that! And be clear, I intend to point toward the fearless, sincere character of love and its shared nurture in glad times spent together, not either to my family or its convention as a model.^x Rest assured, I lace all those memories with a parent's guilts and regrets: the time and attention I could not always give my children; the countless ways I did not live up to their sweetest views of the world; those precious moments and even days I failed to appreciate as fully as I should have – the same kinds of daily tendernesses that we as congregation may look back and feel of our life together in this community: the bittersweet memory of what we loved here and that we now fear has been lost; our treasured experiences in another church home; the blessedness of another season of our life.

Yet, when we hold our church family's life to the light, see it glint with the Belovedness God hopes for us and for all people! See it sparkle and know that we have an *amazing* fall ahead. All we need now, is YOU, you and your deep *gladness* – not the levity of the blithe, but the joy of the faithful. For, friends, if you want to change the world, let's follow the priorities that Jesus set, and let's spend some time together. If you want to feel known and appreciated, seen and valued, then let's go grab a bubble wand and play together. If you want to love Trinity Church more, or again, or for the first time, let's pick up a couple spatulas and flip burgers on the grill.

See, by this time with one another, we let loose of our regret and anger, judgment and snobbery, disappointment and worry, and our hearts grow strong enough to bear our deepest joys without breaking.

For the fullness of joy,
I pray with gladness and singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ I remember fondly the days when acquisition of a new electronic device constituted a real excitement; now it's only a headache.

ⁱⁱ Again: capital "W," formal name, property of Microsoft Corp.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 13:34.

^{iv} John 13:35.

^v Our *Book Of Common Prayer* hides the Collects, tucking the "Traditional" and "Contemporary" iterations on pages 159-261, between Compline and the ordo of Ash Wednesday. Holy moly, that's more than 100 pages! I never noticed the amount of papyrus real estate: that's 10% of the whole dadgum book, an affirming testimony to the rhythms of our Church's prayer life.

^{vi} John 15:9-12.

^{vii} John 17:20,22.

^{viii} Considering this chronology, I think about the gaggles of kids in my neighborhood growing up: we didn't become friends because we chose each other; we became friends because our street and The Woods and the small field by my house made it so – we became friends because we spent so much time together. Grown-ups forget this basic principle that every eight-year-old knows like they know how to climb a magnolia tree.

^{ix} I went down a maudlin path that could not find a comfortable home in this sermon. The story below – one of my longer endnotes ever – felt a little too saccharin for the Sunday pulpit, though it is true as can be and I reserve the right to recount it someday, somewhere:

We arrived on Monday evening. On Tuesday morning, I woke up in the dark and quietly slipped toward the kitchen to make my way to the chapel. As I passed the children's room, Michael raised his head from the shadowy top bunk and announced in a semi-hushed tone, "Dada! Wait for me. I want to go with you."

He was wearing the cowboy pajamas his grandparents had given him for Christmas the year before. The pj's were tight even when he put them on for the first time that winter, but he had insisted on wearing them ever since, I suspect as much for his love of Nana and Boots as for the smiling horses that danced on his arms and legs. Still foggy and his hair standing on end, Michael pulled on a t-shirt and shorts and beat me to the cabin door. I let him ride in the front seat of the car.

Once at the chapel, Michael helped me turn on the lights. We marked the bible with the readings appointed for the day. I set out the candles, and he lit them. At ten minutes of the worship hour, we both rang the big bell to call the camp community to prayer. And then we waited. Vested in cassock, surplus, and tippet, I sat on the front row with my arm around my six-year-old son who played an unknown game with his fingers.

And no one came.

After sitting in the quiet for as long as he could bear, Michael leaned into my side and asked, "Dada ... is nobody coming to church?"

No, babe, I don't think anybody's coming this morning.

"Do we say our prayers even when nobody comes?"

Well, yes we do. And so we did.

"I buh-buh-liiiv? Dada, what's that word?"

Believe.

"Ohhhh. I buh-lev in God, vuh Fah-ver always -"

No: don't guess, read.

“Ohhhh, I forgot. Al-mii-tee?”

That's it! Almighty.

Thinking of then – that last week of a summer with the sun rising, my young son and the Nicene Creed – and thinking of now – that boy a grown man, driving himself to work and dreaming dreams bigger than those horse pajamas –... I was overwhelmed.

It was not that I recalled Michael as an especially pious or righteous child, saying his prayers and interested in Church independent of me. Rather, if I were a plumber, he was under the sink with me, holding the flashlight; he was wearing my stethoscope, dressing in my uniform, drawing with my t-square. I felt the old pride in the way Michael wanted to help and wanted to read and, more than anything, wanted to be with me. And – Lord, have mercy – I felt guilt for all the days I didn't make more time for him, didn't always honor his sweet view of the world. Precious Jesus, I felt LOVE – so ... much ... love – that I thought my heart might burst.

^x We have our moments, but, uh, *no*.