

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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XIX Pentecost, Luke 18:1-8

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

In my hometown of Monroe, Louisiana, my parents, two sisters, and I lived in one of eighteen three-bedroom, two-bath homes on a FEMA floodplain block.ⁱ Next door to us lived two young children, a girl exactly my age and her older brother. At the dead end lived two more elementary-school kids, and catty-corner from our driveway lived another girl the same age as my middle sister. The two of them would become best friends, and all of us on the block spent countless daylight hours together: riding bicycles, building forts, playing kickball and hide-and-go-seek and games peculiar to that street and those days. We were friends.

A few years later and 80 miles to the south, I slept in a Cabin 4 bed next to a guy from Baton Rouge. During that week and the summers that followed, he and I shared cigarettes, wove lanyards, and sweated in those Louisiana woods. In time, he moved to Shreveport as my family had, and, just before Seventh Grade began, he asked if I would join his shorthanded Episcopal-school basketball team as their public-school ringer. That one phone call changed my life; in addition to his company, the team would introduce me to a boy who lived just through the woods from our new house – whose attic would become my second home – and to another boy with an electric guitar and a genius wit. I still count all of them among my closest friends, no matter how much time passes between our visits.ⁱⁱ

Whether bunkmates at a summer program, roommates in college, or colleagues at a first (even crummy) job, our formational experiences often provide some synergy to animate connections with our peers – matched ages, shared geography, or common interests, among others. Even so, my best friends and I did not complete politics-personality surveys before we started hanging out. We did not interview one another to measure either our compatibility or the likely return on a Potential Friendship Investment (a “PFI”). More than my companions and I stuck together through it all, we were *stuck together*, our circumstances choosing us before we chose one another. Yet, open to what might come next and investing heaps of heart and time in our shared company, we found loyalties, loves, and more joy than we could have asked or imagined.ⁱⁱⁱ

In your most treasured relationships, what came first:

- The love or the loveableness?
- The trust or the trustworthiness?
- The hope or the wholeness?
- Your giving or your receiving?

Today’s Gospel lesson asks us to dare faith *before* we experience fulfillment.

After last week's story of the ten lepers, a Pharisee asks when the kingdom of God will come.^{iv} Jesus responds, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed,"^v and he delivers a harrowing vision of mistaken priorities and missed opportunities.^{vi} When Jesus warns that, "there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left ... [and t]hose who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it,"^{vii} the disciples anxiously ask Jesus, "'Where, Lord?'"^{viii} *Where is this to happen?* Jesus responds with the transition to our Gospel appointment, saying to them, "'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.'^{ix} *Then Jesus told them a parable*" – this is the first line of today's lesson – "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."^x

While many will gather at the spectacles of suffering and worldly accomplishment, Jesus instead encourages the disciples to trust in God and in one another, no matter the immediate evidence. To exemplify the point, he tells the parable of a faithful widow who repeatedly petitions an unfair and disinterested judge.^{xi} In a surprising narrative turn, the unjust judge does the right thing and grants the widow her appeal (even if he does so for questionable reasons),^{xii} prompting Jesus to ask the disciples: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"^{xiii} – the implication, *a faith like the widow's?* We can sharpen that question for ourselves: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find such a daring faith here at Trinity Church?"

Today we begin our annual "Stewardship" season, when we invite the people of this congregation to make a financial commitment – a "pledge" – for the upcoming year. We remind one another that a "steward" is one who manages what is not one's own, and as *Christian* Stewards recognizing that all we have is from God, we seek to return to our Creator a measure of what has been entrusted to us. Because God has chosen the Church as the primary instrument of salvation, *by our pledge* we become partners in God's saving work. *By our pledge* we commit to a movement greater than ourselves, an undertaking more consequential than what any one of us could accomplish alone. *By our pledge* we promise that we will make a priority of our relationship with God and one another in the year to come.

Yet, in the context of today's parable, our annual appeals can too easily cast church leadership as the whiny, desperate petitioners, and our congregation as the unjust judges – undesirable roles for us all. With financial anxiety in the offertory plates and the culture's vultures gathering on the West Porch, we adopt the development strategies of our neighbor non-profits: cataloguing our parish's community impacts, pointing to the observable returns on our pledged dollars, and making a *secular* case for supporting Trinity Church. We tuck the call to Godly generosity behind our attractive collateral, and though we breathe a sigh of relief when enough members yield to our persistence and the budget's ends (mostly) meet, this mode of transactional giving will inevitably lead to mistaken priorities and missed opportunities, constraining as much as empowering our ministry. Jesus calls us to aim higher, to dare faith *before* fulfillment.

People of God, believe: all that God hopes for the whole cosmos – all *we* hope for ourselves and our families, for Boston and beyond – *all this begins today with your Stewardship response*, not only what our collective dollars will fund, but what our collective faith will make possible.

If you long for a more loving world, then love Trinity more!
If you yearn for a more trustworthy polis, then invest more deeply here!
If you ache for a more generous world, then give more generously now!

God loves and trusts us before we love and trust in response, and the fundamental labor of our faith, that “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen?”^{xiv} Well, that is to dare do the same, to love *before* our company proves loveable; to trust *before* our neighbors demonstrate trustworthiness; to give *before* we receive anything in return.

Now, is it possible to do all this good and still be disappointed about one thing or another, even to be hurt? Of course. But *not* loving, *not* trusting, *not* giving *assures* that rotten outcome. The disgruntled misunderstand this principle to terrible consequence, thinking that they give little because they love little, when exactly the reverse is true: they scarcely love *because they scarcely give*. For this reason, those who complain the most almost always give the least, injuring not only themselves, but the whole community.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks inspiringly to this principle’s affirmative, that “where [our] treasure is, there [our heart] will be also.”^{xv} Trinity Church is a treasured home of God’s heart for the world – neither the only such home nor an infallible one, but *our* home, where we do choose to stick together, where we offer the best of ourselves and look for the best in one another. And the more among us who will dare give wholeheartedly – faith, upon faith, upon faith – the more likely all of us will find what we are looking for, that fulfillment for which our most precious hopes have always been aimed.

Like the peculiar magic of our most treasured relationships, these are the *essential* mechanics of building a more Beloved Community: we don’t give to Trinity because we’re glad – tipping only when the customer service meets or exceeds expectations – *we are glad because we give*, because we do for God’s Church, what God has done for us. And as a congregation, sharing in this common generosity synergizes us, animating our connections with one another.

So, if you pledged last year – or even if you have for decades – dare ask whether the amount of your commitment matches the heights of your hopes for Trinity Church and for the world. And if it does not, then give more – give until you are glad.

If you are brand new or have never made a pledge to Trinity, know that that God has equipped you with gifts for the mission of Jesus and calls you to commit your heart here, not for your sake only, or for our shared benefit alone, but for the good of the whole world. Dare give faithfully, as generously as you want the world to be generous.

If we will all do this – opening ourselves to what might come next and investing heaps of heart and time in one another – be sure that we can look forward to loyalties, loves, and more joy than we can ask or imagine.

I pray with gladness and singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ In my growing-up years, I twice swam along that street, the water at least chest-deep ... God only knows what was in that mess!

ⁱⁱ More consequentially, he introduced me to another Shreveport classmate of his – a girl I would date for eight years until we married.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ephesians 3:20-21. “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.”

^{iv} Luke 17:20a.

^v Luke 17:20b-21, which continues: “nor will [any] say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact the kingdom of God is among you.”

^{vi} Luke 22-35.

^{vii} Luke 17:34.

^{viii} Luke 17:37a.

^{ix} Not sure I’ve ever heard this line in church before, other than [an homage in last year’s Stewardship sermon](#).

^x Luke 17:38b-18:1.

^{xi} Luke 18:2-3.

^{xii} Luke 18:4-5.

^{xiii} Luke 18:8.

^{xiv} Hebrews 11:1.

^{xv} Matthew 6:21, as referenced in this Stewardship season’s devotional booklet.