

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen  
October 20, 2019

Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God,  
to honor God with praise!<sup>1</sup>  
*Amen.*

Good morning, Trinity Church!

Today we begin our annual Stewardship season, and, continuing our Program Year theme, we have chosen “Known and Loved” to frame this year’s invitation to pledge. Among other scriptures, the theme draws upon Psalm 147, a poem of praise voicing the depth of God’s knowledge and love of us: this One who has created all that is, who “covers the heavens with clouds and prepares rain for the earth” to make “grass to grow upon the mountains” – this One “who heals the brokenhearted” and “lifts up the lowly” – this Holy One “counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names.” And still, as if looking into the great expanse of space, so does God peer into us, knowing each of us fully, and loving each of us completely.

Gladdened by this Good News, together we turn toward the year to come, seeking two important ends: first and most importantly, the nurture of one another as generous, joyful partners in God’s loving mission; and, second, the support of this congregation’s ministry for 2020. On the one hand, these goals are personal and spiritual, and, on the other, communal and practical. During the next five weeks, we will honor *both* charges, seeking to know and to love one another better and more, all while working faithfully to provide for our parish’s ministry.

More than twenty years ago, I began full-time ministry at Saint Mark’s Cathedral in Shreveport, Louisiana, as the Lay Assistant to the Dean and Chaplain to the Cathedral School. Having served The Episcopal Church through my home diocese’s summer-camping program, I brought expertise in s’mores and Capture The Flag, not so much CapEx and candlesticks. Further, as inexperienced in as I was in congregational life, generally, even more was I inexperienced with Stewardship, specifically. My parents never spoke to me about their giving in the Roman Catholic parish where they raised my sisters and me, and I suspect my family’s contributions were as hit-and-miss as our participation.

It was about this time of year, then, that the Dean, the Very Reverend Martin Luther Agnew, Jr, stopped me in the hallway. “Morgan, I need to speak with you,” he said in his deep-toned, Deep South voice. I thought I could detect in his countenance and posture the hints of disappointment, and my heart immediately sank. Grappling with my inexperience, I was an eager and willing learner, and I saw M.L. as a model of the minister I wanted to become. Moreover, not only did I want to emulate him, I wanted to please him – *to make him proud* – and the idea that I had disappointed him was nearly more than I could take.



Following him to his office, I ticked through his possible concerns about my work, until he finally explained: “Morgan, the Stewardship Committee and I met last night, and we looked at the list of members who have not yet pledged. You may know that your last name is ‘Allen’ ... which begins with an ‘A,’ meaning you and Missy were at the top of the list. *You can’t be on that list!* I need you to make your pledge as soon as possible. It’s important – for you and for Saint Mark’s.”

I was too embarrassed to admit to M.L. that I did not know what a “Stewardship Committee” was, and I was cynical enough to wonder: you know, I work *at the church* ... do I still have to pledge? I mean, shouldn’t I be exempt, or something? I mean, they just paid me this money, and now they want it back?

Keeping my questions to myself, I thanked the Dean for the reminder, and, dutifully, I carried a pledge card upstairs to my office.

In 1998, my annual stipend at Saint Mark’s was \$12,400, and, before noon that day, I filled out my first pledge card for \$500. To discern that amount, Missy and I did not hold hands and pray together for a word from the Lord. Instead, I sat alone at my desk and attempted to discern the lowest possible commitment that would keep me out of trouble with M.L. and this “Stewardship” group, and, being as naïve as I was, I suspected few were giving much more.

That afternoon I brought my pledge card to the Dean, and I braved a question, “Now, M.L, do you and Ms. Patty pledge, even though you’re a priest?”

To his credit, M.L. did not shame me for my question, though he did crack a smile. “Morgan, Patty and I are joyful givers, and Stewardship is important to us, not only as priest or as Dean, but as servants of the Lord who love this Church.” It was as though he had been carrying the answer in his back pocket for years, waiting for someone to ask him just this question.

I pressed my luck: “So ... do you pledge ... a lot?”

Thankfully, I had not exhausted his graciousness, and I even detected his shoulders raise with pride as he explained: “We are always among Saint Mark’s largest pledges. There are not many families more grateful than the Agnews.”

Missy and I were twenty-three-year-old newlyweds making a house together, and we were learning that *everything* cost money. While, by percentage, our \$500 pledge represented only 4% of our earnings, our income was so modest that we struggled to meet even that commitment. As we began our Stewardship story, we did not seek to be faithful – we sought to avoid embarrassment. As our Stewardship story began, we did not consider what God wanted of us we considered what we wanted for ourselves. – As our Stewardship story began, we did not ask, “Lord, how much is enough?” – we asked how little was acceptable.

Despite these middling-to-poor intentions, God blessed our delinquent pledge, and we – to our great surprise – entered *a lifetime* of sacrificial giving. That first year we simply started where we were, and, in keeping the discipline of it, I don't recall "joy" as my immediate spiritual response. In such a large parish, what we had to offer felt so meager – of so little consequence to the whole – but, in time, the commitment became deeply meaningful *to us*. We enjoyed the sense of pride and investment our pledge provided: When that grand, Cathedral organ swelled with sound on Sundays, we felt *ourselves* in its mighty song! When that congregation gathered for midnight mass on Christmas Eve – dimming the lights, kneeling, and singing "Silent Night" – we dared imagine *ourselves* in the deep magic of that story and those prayers! And when that parish took to the complicated neighborhood where we lived, we realized that we were there – *even when we were not!* – serving, supporting, marching every righteous step. And if the Allens were not the first pledge in that basket the next year, we were behind only the Dean himself.

Missy and I have now pledged in every season of my priesthood ... not because I'm "The Priest" or "The Rector," but because we are "servants of the Lord who love this Church." Though Missy, Michael, Ginna, and I have never been among the wealthiest members of the parishes we have served, we, like the Agnews, are proud to have been counted among the largest pledgers in every one of those congregations. And we are so honored to have made our 2020 pledge to Trinity Church in the City of Boston – to make our investment *here*, and to establish our share in ministry with you.

At this time of year, we congregational leaders often speak as though every member of our parish was born into a Stewardship Committee meeting, and we offer neither explication nor apology for that church-y combination of jargon and euphemism we use to discuss both the spiritual devotions of sacrifice and generosity, and the practical, financial life of this institution. I am grateful that M.L. made room for Missy and me to grow authentically into the joyful givers he hoped we would become. By challenging me and making room for my simple questions, he afforded me my dignity and treated me like an adult.

Here at Trinity Church, during our Sunday-morning Forums through the conclusion of our program on November 24, we will address the brass tacks of our financial life as a parish with candor and clarity, and, in what follows in this pulpit this morning, I hope to offer to you that gift M.L. gave to me, explaining our Stewardship jargon and providing us a common foundation of ideas and vocabulary upon which we all might become those joyful givers God intends us to be:

A "steward" is one who manages what is not one's own. As *Christian Stewards*, we recognize that *all* we have is from God, and we return to our generous Creator a measure of what we have been given.

God has chosen the Church as the primary bearer of Jesus' Good News, and God has equipped every member of the Body of Christ with gifts to offer this mission. *You have gifts for that mission!* We often speak of these gifts in the alliterative triumvirate of "time, talent, and treasure," not so that different members of the parish can offer one or the other, but so that all of us would recognize the rich giftedness within ourselves, and that every one of us would give as fully as we can *of all three*.

During our annual Stewardship season at Trinity Church, we invite the people of this congregation to make a financial commitment for the upcoming year. We call that commitment a “pledge,” and our pledge is a promise that we will make a priority of our relationship with God. By our pledge, we become partners in God’s saving work. By our pledge we become part of a movement greater than ourselves, an undertaking greater than what any one of us could accomplish alone. By our faithful pledge every one of us has an equal share in every ministry of this remarkable parish . . . *By our faithful pledge every one of us has an equal share in every ministry of this remarkable parish.*

As I have read in Trinity’s materials from previous Stewardship efforts, “the standard of our Christian giving should reflect the standard of our Boston living,”<sup>2</sup> and, Trinity Church, we should seek to give God our best! Not just what’s leftover or only what’s easy. Thanks be to God, Boston is not a city of leftovers. We live in communities steeped in history – yes – but leaning *hopefully* into the future. Living here, we enjoy extraordinary privileges, and, in response, our giving should be extraordinary.

The biblical standard of giving is the tithe, the first 10% of one’s income. We return those “first fruits” to invite God’s blessing on all that we have received, the whole of our lives. For some, the tithe will be a goal to which one works, while, for others, the tithe will mark a minimum gift.

Importantly, we do not pledge to keep the church’s lamps lit or any “dues” current. We give because God has called us to give. God has made us in the image of the Divine, which is to name that we have been made generous and loving and good. The tension, of course, is that we do have a responsibility to pay the electric bills and to fund the ministry of our parish, all to keep vital that chosen instrument of salvation, the Church. Therefore, our invitation to Stewardship has those two, related aims I named at the outset: individually, our prayer is that every member of this congregation will give faithfully; and, collectively, we trust we will have all we need to fund the ministry to which God has called Trinity Church.

In recent years at Trinity, we have emphasized a collective financial goal in our Stewardship appeal, and while our needs persist, your parish leadership has not and will not set such a goal for next year. Instead, we, as faithful stewards, have committed to give our best gifts – **asking “*Lord, how much is enough,*” rather than *how little is acceptable*** – and we invite you to join us and to do the same. Whether that best gift finds you early in your Stewardship story and discerning a pledge even for the first time; whether that best gift finds you aiming for the tithe; or whether that best gift finds you leaping from the tithe toward higher, heartfelt horizons; I encourage you to give of who you are, from where you are, to trust God’s eagerness to bless your commitment, and to welcome the joy that will follow your gift.

Indeed, “Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God, to honor God with praise!”

*Amen.*

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#### Endnotes

- 1 Psalm 147:1a, from the Psalter in the *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979.
- 2 I believe the Rev. Ed Bacon, during his tenure at All Saints in Pasadena, California, turned this clever phrase.