

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

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*Proper 19 (Year B): Mark 8:27-38*

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.<sup>i</sup> *Amen.*

Good morning, Trinity Church!

I am glad to see you, I am glad to be back. For those new among us, I am today returned from a summer-long Sabbatical. And while that experience got off to an unsteady start when our college-aged son suffered a health crisis, I am grateful before all else that I can report he is doing well, and that scare now seems passed. Thank you for your prayers and concern during that scary time. Thank you, too, to my colleagues, to our Wardens and Vestry, and, again, to all of you, for making room for my family and me to have had the important time away in the much happier months since. I look forward to sharing more about our adventures, though, for now, let's get to church!

In February of 1963, a 76-year-old Paul Tillich delivered the Earl Lectures at California's Graduate Theological Union. Tillich, an intellectual giant of his century, fled Hitler's Germany and would teach at Union Seminary, Harvard, and the University of Chicago. Ready for the Berkeley event, he recognized the well-meaning pressure of his peers and devotees that he deliver a capstone address, an academy-ready summary of his life's work.

Instead, Tillich recalled the confessional focus that came to him "like a voice of conscience: 'You must speak in this situation, not what you already know, or believe you know – [for,] of course, you know nothing – but what is nearest your heart.'" He continues, "[W]hen I thought about it, I decided that what worries me most deeply in these last years is the question: 'Is the Christian message ... still relevant to the people of our time? And if not,'" why not?

While Tillich spoke amid "increased [Church] membership and attendance" following World War II, he suspected much of Christianity's "success" was superficial. Portending the decades of decline leading to our American moment, he voiced concern that "typical [Christian] preaching does not *reach* large groups of people, even among those who regularly attend church" (friends, that's a dig toward us, preacher and people).<sup>ii</sup> Seeing through the "suburban captivity" and social movements of his post-war age, he proposed that the Christian message's continuing "relevance depended upon its engagement with humanity's existential questions ... those [wonderings] that concern the *whole* of human existence," our asking ourselves and asking one another:

'What is the meaning of my being, and of all being of which I am a part? ...

'How can I have hope? And for what? ...

‘Where can I find an ultimate concern that overcomes my emptiness and has the power to transform?’”

In service of this inquiry, Tillich distinguishes between “belief” and “faith.” He submits, “*beliefs* are opinions held to be true,” noting, “we need beliefs in practical affairs all the time,” for rather than actions themselves, beliefs precede and inform our actions. We *believe* that traffic will be better the earlier we leave the house for work, so we leave early. However, as those of us who regularly brave Boston traffic or the MBTA will know, these beliefs “may or may not really be true,” and, depending upon any number of contingencies, our belief may prove false. In any case, beliefs always concern and confirm our finitude and “are never a matter of life and death,” never of ultimate concern.

Distinct from belief, “*faith* is the state of being grasped by something that has ultimate meaning, and [then] acting and thinking on the basis of this.” In Tillich’s conception, one does not and cannot “have” faith, for one cannot possess faith. Instead, through encounters with the Divine – engagements of grace, of love, of beauty, of joy, of mystery – one *faiths*, if you will, and then responds by deepening and dwelling in that experience. Recognize the dynamism to which Tillich points: faith is the *being grasped* by the ultimate – not the static hold, but the active, *being held* – and, then, thinking and believing – *living* – out of that transcendent experience.

Another way to image these ideas: “beliefs” only move us horizontally – forward, perhaps, but *only* forward, without an ultimate destination, while “faith” propels us vertically, toward what Tillich calls “the unconditional.”

Today’s Gospel appointment almost exactly centers Mark, and Jesus and the disciples’ trip to the villages of Caesarea Philippi follows a series of miracles escalating the narrative’s rising action nearly to crescendo: Jesus’ walking on water in chapter 6;<sup>iii</sup> his healing of a deaf man in chapter 7;<sup>iv</sup> and the feeding of four thousand earlier in chapter 8.<sup>v</sup> Jesus punctuates each of these acts with teaching,<sup>vi</sup> and in this miracle-reflection, miracle-reflection, miracle-reflection rhythm, today’s exchange with Peter punctuates Jesus’ healing of a blind man in the immediately preceding verses.<sup>vii</sup>

This alternation between action and instruction affirms our understandable questions about the Gospel’s events:

Jesus has walked on water ... *how can this be?*

Jesus has unstopped the ears of the deaf ... *from where does he draw this power?*

Jesus has given sight to the blind ... *what does this mean?*

Therefore, when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”, we readers lean close to the text, for this is the same question we have been asking ourselves, the same question the storytelling has asked of us.<sup>viii</sup>

Who do *we* say that Jesus is?

Our Program Year theme – “Held In Common” – has roots in the Acts of the Apostles, when members of the earliest Church “were of one heart and soul,”<sup>ix</sup> when they “spent much time together in the temple, [breaking] bread at home and [eating] with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”<sup>x</sup>

“Held In Common” affirms and inspires our Trinity Church community, setting our commitment to live in love with one another within these walls before the disagreements and devastations beyond them.

“Held In Common,” celebrates instruments of our unity – among others, Holy Eucharist and the *common* cup, the Book of *Common Prayer*, and the *common* bindings of our Church, including the ordination of our new bishop diocesan here at Trinity next month.

And “Held In Common” acknowledges, too, the complications and conflicts that *do* surround our loving life together. Close at hand are the contradictions of nearby Boston Common: that resting place for the unhoused in the shadow of a golden dome; that setting for both embrace and protest; as voiced in Anthony Lucas’ Pulitzer Prize-winning tome, *Common Ground*, that site of our union and our division.

As we at Trinity turn ourselves toward this new Program Year, we can see – we can *sense* – the fifty-year anniversary of busing in Boston. We can feel the November election looming with a consequence unlike any in our lifetimes. We daily carry with us the wars and threats of wars that tremble the whole globe.

And in response to these righteous anxieties, “human things” tempt us as solutions. That is, our fears may prefer our religious life to begin with a common roster of “beliefs,” rather than the more dangerous, wilder common experience of “faith.” We may want preaching and teaching and singing that reassures our partisan positions, rather than inspires our faithful curiosity. We may seek a Jesus who will immunize us from unease, ensuring our will may be done, our preferences met, our comforts uninterrupted.

Trinitarians, even if we endeavor these pursuits with best intentions – to control and manage our encounters with God – our life together will remain grounded along the horizontal and stuck in the preliminary. For tending these surface symptoms of our deeper aching, we will achieve only superficial salves; we will worsen our existential crises. And when the world – whether near or far, in Boston or in Washington, in Kiev or in Jerusalem, around our kitchen table or at the doctor’s office – when the world does not go our way, **trust in the God who plans, belief in the Jesus who fixes, will invariably, inevitably, crack and fail**, leaving us with neither the perspective nor the foundation to overcome our woundedness and worry.

“Held In Common” – not the static hold, but the active, *being held* – this Program Year we will set ourselves to “divine things,”<sup>xi</sup> shared engagements with grace and beauty, joy and mystery. This fall we will spend much time in this holy temple. We will break bread together, and we will eat with glad and generous hearts. With no assurance of any particular outcome, we will brave with one another the grandest questions of our existence! We will dare trust these common experiences to build among us the faith and the fortitude to meet the seasons ahead, whatever they might bring.

For “Held In Common” – grasped by God – we will find ascendancy in humility, life in the cross, and love and love and love in all things.

In the name of Christ we begin this new year,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> From Psalm 31.

<sup>ii</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>iii</sup> Mark 6:45-52.

<sup>iv</sup> Mark 7:31-37.

<sup>v</sup> Mark 8:1-10.

<sup>vi</sup> Mark 7:1-23; 8:14-21.

<sup>vii</sup> Mark 8:22-26.

<sup>viii</sup> Mark 8:27.

<sup>ix</sup> Acts 4:32.

<sup>x</sup> Acts 2:46-47.

<sup>xi</sup> Mark 8:33.