

TRINITY CHURCH
COPLEY SQUARE
BOSTON 02116

OCTOBER 13, 1974

A LETTER TO A CHURCH IN A TROUBLED CITY

Instead of preaching a sermon this morning, I am going to read you a letter that I have written. This letter is addressed to you, the people of Trinity Church. I am writing to you because my heart is troubled. I know that at this point in the life of our city others are deeply troubled too. And because of that fact I am writing to you whom I love so as to share my concern and cares. There is nothing unique about how I feel. There is nothing unique about what I will say. What I hope to be different is the response we can give as a Christian Church to a city that is in trouble and needs some answers that possibly we can give. Here is my letter, addressed to all of you.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:

Today I feel like a stranger in my own land. I know that many others feel like strangers too, maybe even aliens. Ten, even fifteen years ago, we all watched as other sections of the country attempted to eradicate the barriers that separated blacks and whites in this country. I am sure many of you remember Little Rock, Arkansas; Selma, Alabama and many other places pushed into the headlines as people tried to go to school and gain equal rights. Some of us even participated in that struggle and were proud of the achievements. Only sin has roots in pride. We had failed to look in our own back yard. For right here in Boston, the walls which have divided people are higher and stronger than most, yet are also a little more difficult to see. They have been more subtle and sophisticated, and thus easier to ignore. However, we cannot ignore them anymore.

School busing has been ordered in the attempt to integrate the schools. This is the law for the city and there is nothing that we can do to change that today. Violence has erupted because of that order. Racism of the most brutal kind is now evident throughout the city. Whites have turned against black, black against white, even white against white, and black against black. I know that this is not the case for the whole city, but there is enough evidence that it fills the newspapers and can be seen and heard on the television and radio. If you have been listening and watching for the past couple of weeks I think you know what I mean. Just the other day I heard the principal of

the Middle School in my neighborhood tell me a white parent would not send her child to his integrated school because she was afraid that her neighbors, who are white, would throw rocks through her windows. I have difficulty understanding that. That's why I feel like a stranger in this city today.

I secretly thought deep down inside me that outside forces were needed only in other American cities, where people could not be controlled by local police. But no, today I find that is true for my own city. I thought rocks were only thrown at innocent children riding buses in other cities, not in Boston. But I have seen the glass in the hair of a bewildered and scared young girl. That's why I feel like a stranger in this city this morning.

We are a city that has prided herself on her history. Here is where the roots of American Liberty, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness all began. A lantern was hung in a church steeple not far from here. There was a shot fired only a few towns from here that was "heard 'round the world." Only not everyone has seen the light of that lantern or heard the echo of that shot. For there are people in this country and in this city who still suffer at the hands of injustice and racism. Many still do not have freedom, freedom of choice and the right to participate in their own destiny which that lantern and shot represented. Children in this city, white as well as black, do not have the opportunity for decent education because they are the victims of an educational structure that is self-preserving and too political.

Boston, which some have called the Athens of America, stands today not only far from Athens but even further from fulfilling the ideals that Athens stood for. Boston's soul is troubled. That's why I am troubled and why you should be too. That's why I feel like a stranger in this city today.

The history of Trinity Church and its ministry in this city has been a rich one. The city has loved this church as much as the church has loved this city. We need only look at the Augustus Saint Gauden's statue of Phillips Brooks which majestically faces onto Copley Square and Boylston Street. That statue was given by the school children in the City of Boston after the death of Phillips Brooks. I need not say any more about the influence of Trinity's ministry upon the children of this city in that day. The statue speaks of that influence. But maybe we should have something to say and to give to the children of this city today. We are a part of this city and her children are suffering and thus we are too.

Many people raise questions over the relative merits of busing. When they ask me that question I simply say that is a question that would be asked by the Pharisees. No matter which side of the issue you took you would be trapped. Let us remember that it is not a

question of busing, but rather of quality education for all the children in this city. That is what should be our utmost concern.

On Wednesday of this past week, I was called by one of the Vestrymen of this parish. He is a man deeply committed to the giving of himself in working for others. He asked me what should this parish be doing in light of what was happening in our schools and on the city streets. I thought for a moment and said, "I don't know. I really don't know". That was a devastating answer, at least for me, to give. I was taken back for a moment after I had uttered the words. It was like a thunder clap, and the reality of the words took a few minutes to sink in. I felt helpless and powerless. In one sense, as I have since reflected upon my answer, it reflects the state of the Church today: that the Church today is powerless to change what we see going on around us. When mob violence rules our streets rather than peace and calm, there is nothing we can do other than to help those who are trying to restore order so that no one will get hurt or killed.

Many people feel betrayed by the Church. For years, even centuries, the Church has blessed the cultural norms of this city and this land regardless of their social or ethical implications. Because of its nature and origins, the Church has to be not only of the culture, but has to stand over against it, because its allegiance is to God and not to men. Too often our allegiance has been to men. People have become used to that. When allegiances are switched, people are confused, bewildered and feel a sense of abandonment. Many in this city feel this way now. It is the Church's ambivalence in its loyalty that has caused her influence to wane. This is difficult to say, but the Church as we know it now has found a great deal of its life has been absorbed by the culture that is all around us. Tragically, our culture is a violent one, all be it permeated with the desire for peace. Yet we think we are only able to achieve peace by violence and war. And in the end we find we really have no peace anyway.

Please do not think that I am giving up on the Church. I would not be writing you this letter if I were. But I do not want us to have any false ideas as to what we think our influence or power or prestige can do to change overnight what we find in our city today. Yet while our influence, power and prestige are limited, our hope for the future is *unlimited*. This is what it means to be together as Christians in this Church, in this city, at this time. Above all else, this is what characterizes the Church. We have no reason to despair, only reason to hope.

You know the influence Jeremiah had upon Israel during his ministry. His words were a clear beacon that shed light in the midst of a dark period in Israel's history. Israel had been banished into exile in Babylon because she had made her allegiance to men rather than to Yahweh, or God. They were exiles in a foreign land. Yet they were

given hope. God had not betrayed them; they had betrayed God. Jeremiah told his people: seek the welfare of the city wherein you find yourselves. In seeking her welfare God will provide for you a future and a hope. Seek God and you will be found by God. Jeremiah speaks in what can be called the ultimate paradox of religion.

Jeremiah was asking Israel to write a new relationship with God, not on tablets or in the law books, but within the heart: a new covenant established by the will of God, not by the will of men.

Jeremiah could be speaking to us now. Though I have not been banished into exile in a foreign land, I feel like a stranger, sometimes abandoned, sometimes confused. But that need not be a permanent state. For there is always hope. Jesus said, "Seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you." As Christians the curious paradox we have to offer the world is that the finding is in the seeking — only when it is done with all our heart. This is what was demanded of Israel; this is what is demanded of us; and this is the offer, one of hope, we have to give to the city of Boston today.

We know that Jesus was not able to eliminate hate, distrust, violence and the brutal manner in which men treated each other. At times he was troubled, and that was when he most often prayed. Though troubled, he never gave up hope. His ministry was one of love and justice and mercy always couched in hope.

Our hope today is for a ministry that could be a monument to this city. Our ministry can be offered as a Statue of love and justice and mercy not moulded in granite as Gauden's statue of Phillips Brooks, but rather imbedded in the hearts and minds of every child in this city. It is once again time to show these children that we love them, care for them, need them, so that we no longer feel strange or alien, but rather see them as our neighbors. It may take years to achieve this, but that is no reason why we should not start right now.

And so I conclude this letter to you by saying that we at Trinity Church have a most precious gift to give this city, namely Hope. Let us take this opportunity to seek the welfare of this city. She needs our love and concern as well as our actions. Our future lies in the will of God, not in the will of men. Always let us seek and find God, for there we have found the greatest hope of all, for ourselves and this city.

Faithfully yours,

Tom

(This letter was read at Trinity Church on Sunday, October 13, 1974 by the Reverend Thomas B. Kennedy.)