

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

May 21, 2023

VII Easter, John 17:1-11

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia.

Some years ago, novelist Paul Auster appeared on the National Public Radio program *All Things Considered*. After the segment, the host asked Auster if he would be interested in making monthly appearances for the weekend version of the show. Auster, knowing too well his struggles to write *without* any deadline, doubted that he could function *within* such a regular and frequent rhythm. For politeness' sake, though, he promised "he would think about it" and drove home, presuming he would call the next day and decline the offer.ⁱ

However, at the dinner table that evening, Auster told his wife of NPR's invitation. Hearing her husband's hesitation, between bites she suggested, "Well, Paul, you don't have to write all the stories yourself. Get people to sit down and write their *own* stories. They can send them to you, and you can read the best ones on the air. If enough people wrote in, it could become something extraordinary."ⁱⁱ Auster agreed.

In September, he again appeared on *All Things Considered*, this time pitching what was to become The National Story Project. He explained to his listeners that their stories "had to be true," and, given the length of the program, they "had to be short. There would be, however, no restrictions as to style, content, or subject matter," and he went on to describe his particular interest in tales that "defied our expectations about the world, anecdotes that revealed the mysterious forces at work in our lives, in our family histories, in our minds and bodies, and in our souls."ⁱⁱⁱ

Before the Project ended, Paul Auster would receive and review over five thousand submissions – five thousand stories of hope and coincidence, death and hurt, love and mercy. He collected The Project's best pieces in an anthology entitled, *I Thought My Father Was God*. The first story in that compendium was also the first story that Auster read on the air. It is "The Chicken," by Linda Elegant of Portland, Oregon. Ms. Elegant writes:

As I was walking down Stanton Street early one Sunday morning, I saw a chicken a few yards ahead of me. I was walking faster than the chicken, so I gradually caught up. By the time we approached Eighteenth Avenue, I was close behind. The chicken turned south on Eighteenth. At the fourth house along, it turned in at the walk, hopped up the front steps, and rapped sharply on the metal storm door with its beak. After a moment, the door opened, and the chicken went in.^{iv}

Lucy Hayden of New York writes of the weekend on Long Island Sound she spent with her five siblings following the death of their mother.^v Stan Benkowski of Sunnyside, tells the story of a rained-out Detroit Tigers' baseball game that eventually found him and his father laughing uproariously in their family's 1948 sedan.^{vi} Beth Kivel of Durham, writes of twice being mistaken for the same woman, by the same stranger, years apart and on different coasts.^{vii}

And on and on and on, the National Story Project capturing pieces of American life which, when assembled, present a portrait of our human experience at once common and extraordinary.

Today's Gospel appointment continues the scene we have held in our worship since Maundy Thursday: Jesus calling his friends to supper and speaking to them across their shared table.^{viii} Since Jesus' commission that the disciples "love one another" as he has loved them,^{ix} during the Easter season we have traced this valedictory speech, from its familiar bars in chapter 14, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me,"^x through the last verses of chapter 16 – just before this morning's lesson – when Jesus encourages the disciples, "I have said all this to you, so that in me you may have peace."^{xi}

As a concluding gesture, Jesus now looks up to heaven and prays for his friends.^{xii} Notice here both the form and the content of this summary action: Jesus does not deliver another commandment; does not teach another parable; does not perform another miracle. Instead, he *prays* [that is, the *form* of his action]. And when he prays, he prays that his disciples "would be one," as he and the Father are one^{xiii} [that, is the *content* of his petition].

Choosing prayer, Jesus enlivens the connections between himself and God and his Beloved Community, conjuring "the mysterious forces at work in our lives." Orienting his prayer to the foundation of all being – "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed"^{xiv} – Jesus repeats the theological application of "the transitive property of equality:"^{xv} last Sunday addressed to the disciples: "I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you;"^{xvi} and this morning addressed to God, the Father: "All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them."^{xvii}

By form and by content, Jesus realizes and reiterates the loving union in which and for which God created the cosmos. A lot of "and" phrases there! Breaking them down: by choosing prayer, the form of Jesus' action connects him to God and God's creation. Likewise, by praying for the loving unity of his friends, he not only reiterates his rhetorical formula – "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me; therefore, if you are in me, then you are in the Father" – he enacts his petition and accomplishes, if only for that moment, the hope for which God created the whole world.

My favorite of The National Story Project's submissions is from Kristine Lundquist, of Camarillo, California. Ms. Lundquist writes:

In 1949 my parents made the big move from Rockford, Illinois, to Southern California, along with three very tiny children and all their household possessions. My mother had carefully wrapped and packed many precious family heirlooms, including four cartons of her mother's hand-painted dinner [porcelain]. Grandmother had painted this lovely set herself, choosing a forget-me-not pattern.

Unfortunately, something happened during the move. One box of [fine porcelain] ... never arrived at our new house. So, my mother had only three-quarters of the set – she had plates of different sizes and some serving pieces but missing were the cups and saucers and the bowls. Often at family gatherings or when we would all sit down for a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner, my mother would say something about [what was] missing and how she wished it had survived the trip.

When my mother [died], I inherited Grandmother's setting.

I love to prowl [second-hand sales], hunting for treasures[, yet] I hadn't been to a [shop or an event] in over a year when, one [I got] the itch to go. I crawled out of bed at 5 A.M. and drove an hour in the predawn darkness to the giant Rose Bowl Flea [Market]. I walked up and down the [many] outdoor aisles.

[I was thinking about leaving when] I rounded the last corner[,] took a few steps down the row[, and] noticed some [porcelain pieces strewn on the ground beneath a vendor's table]. I saw that it was hand-painted ... with forget-me-nots! I raced over to look at [the collection] more closely and gingerly picked up a cup and saucer ... forget-me-nots! [Conspicuous with my grandmother's] delicate strokes and the same thin gold bands around the rims. I looked at the rest of the items – there were the cups! The saucers! The bowls! [All the missing pieces.]

The dealer noticed my excitement, and [I] told her [my story]. She [explained that] the set had come from an estate sale in Pasadena – the next town over from Arcadia, where we had lived when I was a child. [As] she was going through the contents of the estate, she had found an old, unopened carton stored in the garden shed, and the [pieces were] in it. She questioned the heirs about the [porcelain] and they said that they knew nothing about it, [only] that the box had been in the shed 'forever.'

I left the Rose [Bowl] that day laden with my amazing treasure. Even now, [years] later, I am filled with wonder that “all the pieces in the universe” [somehow] tumbled together [so that I could] find the missing [porcelain]. What would have happened if I had slept in? What gave me the itch to go to the [flea market] on that particular day? What if I hadn't turned that last corner, choosing instead to leave and rest my aching feet?

Last week I had a dinner party for fifteen friends. We used [the *full* setting]. And, at the end of the meal, I proudly served coffee in those beautiful cups and saucers [my grandmother had painted.]”^{xviii}

Beyond my resonant, treasure-hunting affections, I *love* this story.

And more than I only *believe* it to be true, I *feel* its truth; somewhere deeper than merely accepting its facts,^{xix} I feel its truth *in my being*, that I – that all of us! – have a share in the mystery of its glad coincidence.^{xx}

Does this mean I believe that God confined Ms. Lundquist in a California football stadium and then scooted her missing tableware into view? It does not. Yet I *do* believe God has wrought the worlds^{xxi} in such a way that when we hope for reunion, God hopes with us. I *do* believe that when we labor for loving connection, God labors with us – God in us, and we in God^{xxii} – and that prayers as elemental as a daughter’s aching for the work of her family’s hand, have a cosmic hearing and make a difference ... some strange how, in some unknowable way.

With Easter’s alchemy still smoldering, be sure that the “mysterious forces at work in our lives ... in our minds and bodies ... in our souls,” bind us *together*, just as Jesus prayed, and just as Jesus witnessed in his nature and in his life – that loving nature we share, the loving content of his heart that remains our own.^{xxiii} And while we may harden ourselves and choose to defy Jesus’ prayer – claiming righteousness or withholding grace, allowing sin or snobbery to separate us along sidewalks or in hallways, on pew cushions or at supper tables – we do so at our own peril; not that God will punish us, but that we will have punished ourselves, and, grievously, we will have harmed one another. For God created the cosmos with energies for unity to overcome estrangement; for forgiveness to heal guilt; and for joy to conquer despair.^{xxiv} And, in time’s fulfillment, all that has been lost will be found, and all that has broken will be made whole.^{xxv}

For that gladness to come,
I pray with singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ Auster, Paul, editor. *I Thought My Father Was God*, Picador, 2001, p. xv.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Auster, pp. xv-xvi.

^{iv} Auster, p. 3.

^v Auster, p. 76.

^{vi} Auster, p. 75.

^{vii} Auster, p. 125.

^{viii} John 13.

^{ix} John 13:31-35.

^x John 14:1.

^{xi} John 16:33.

^{xii} John 17:1-3.

^{xiii} John 17:11. I regret that this Lectionary appointment does not also include 17:20-21, which both incorporates us in the contemporary Church as inheritors of the faith (“I ask not only behalf of these, but on behalf of those who will believe in me through that word”) and purposes the unity to which he calls us (“*so that* the world may believe that you have sent me”).

^{xiv} John 17:5.

^{xv} If $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$, as noted in [the May 7, 2023, sermon, “A Place In God’s House.”](#)

^{xvi} John 14:20.

^{xvii} John 17:10.

^{xviii} Auster, pp. 39-40. With apologies to both Mr. Auster and Ms. Lundquist, I tightened this piece for the sermon context. Even so, the quotation remains as long as any I’ve ever spoken from the pulpit – a sign of my admiration for the story!

^{xix} Its content.

^{xx} Akin to its form, a point too clunky to make in the sermon itself, but that I hope landed, nonetheless.

^{xxi} Again, “loving reunion” is the form of the creation.

^{xxii} And, once more, the content in synch with the creation’s form.

^{xxiii} Now daring a repetitiveness rivaling John!

^{xxiv} From “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage,” P. 429

^{xxv} I do not understand how the creation’s freedom will be honored *and* God’s ultimate ambitions will be fulfilled. Yet, I do believe both will come to pass.