

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
September 10, 2023
Program Year Launch, Ephesians 2:11-22

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

I'm here to tell you that the Reverend Benedict Songy was a powerful Jedi.

Like many of us, Ben had trouble hearing, and, when we would gather for our staff meetings at Saint Matthias Episcopal Church in Shreveport, Louisiana – where he was a long-serving Assisting Priest and where I served as Curate – Ben would sit quietly, turn to face the conversation, and lower his eyelids. As in the company of a Kenobi, I could feel him reading my mind so that he did not have to bother hearing my words. One-by-one he would tug the thoughts out of my head, maybe even before I could think them.

I had not been in that parish long before I proposed “trying” something new. No matter the quality of the idea, the language of my intention would not do: as if bitten by a Dragonsnake,² Ben challenged me: “Try? Why are you going to *try*? Morgan, I suggest you either do this new thing, or you do not.” Again transported to the swamps of the Dagobah system, I could hear Yoda’s counsel to his young apprentice: “Do or do not. There is no try.”³

Born in 1929, Father Songy – as he preferred for his formal address – had been classically trained in the arts of “the Force,” as it were. He left for Roman Catholic seminary when he was fourteen, eventually taking up a new name – Benedict – to mark his entrance into that new way of life. Related to his commission that I *do*, rather than *try*, he recalled of those teenage years a Latin phrase that he and his classmates would graffiti on their notebooks: *Esse quam videri* – “To be rather than to seem.” Remembering what I doodled as a teenager, I admired those padawans who, as Ben explained, took up that challenge and sought to make it their personal motto.

As our appointment from the letter to the Ephesians begins, the author identifies their audience as “Gentiles by birth,”⁴ and notes the distinction that the circumcised make between themselves and the uncircumcised [the same conflict our Gospel voices⁵]. The author then sharpens that remembered distance between the two groups: “you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”⁶ – about as bleak an appraisal as could be delivered. However, the line that follows confirms the implied understanding that those “who once were far off have been brought near” by Jesus.⁷ Indeed, whatever isolation or enmity that previously existed has now been healed, “For [Christ] is *our* peace.”⁸ Note that shift from the second person, to the first-person plural – from “*you* were,” to “*our* peace” – a unity that the next line

fortifies: Jesus “has made *both groups into one* and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”⁹

God’s action has delivered a reconciliation so complete that one group has not simply accepted the other into *their* way of being, but a single, “*new humanity*”¹⁰ has been created. Understand this innovation as essential to the fulfillment of God’s hopes: it’s not that I’m gonna allow *your* grandmother’s delicate dresser into *my* room, or that you are permitting *my* favorite chair in *your* den. No, we are moving to a new home altogether! Founded upon the apostles and saints with Jesus as the cornerstone,¹¹ now *your* stuff and *my* stuff is entirely *our* stuff, and, just like George Carlin expected,¹² there is place for it all.

This new creation “[makes] peace” and creates “one body through the cross, [putting divisions] to death.”¹³ Again, the author reinforces the new union for which Jesus “came and proclaimed peace to [all] who were far off [and to all] who were near”¹⁴ – Jesus proclaimed to *both*, not to one or the other. “For through [Christ all] of us have access *in one Spirit* to the Father.”¹⁵ Even if Paul did not author Ephesians – a traditional ascription debated in recent centuries¹⁶ – we hear in this letter the purposeful echoes of his theology,¹⁷ that there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for [we are] one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁸

Today we begin our new Program Year as “Companions in the Household of God,”¹⁹ and we draw that theme from the epistle’s next line: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.”²⁰

See, Jesus calls us into a home where the loving nature of our God unites us with all those in-time²¹ and across-time who have shared in the Good News of Jesus. The Holy Spirit continually transforms us from an assembly of adversaries, into a fellowship of friends; from a gathering of rivals, into a beloved community; from a collection of strangers into the very Body of Christ.²² By God’s love for us and our love for one another, we become companions in this “dwelling place” of the holy One.²³

Ordained in 1955, Father Songy taught in the seminary until God called him out *into* the world; into a long and happy marriage to Jackie Shelton;²⁴ and into The Episcopal Church. With an agelessness also rivaling Yoda, Ben – well into his eighties – served as the Chaplain to the Canterbury House at Centenary College, there in Shreveport. Though upon first glance perhaps an unlikely companion for a young-adult ministry, Centenary became the most active Episcopal campus center in that Diocese.

Ben met the earnestness of his students’ formational years with a warm authenticity, one entirely absent of contrivance. A humble teacher, he did not present himself as wiser than he was. A loyal leader, he did not allow the reactive chirping of *a few* to distract him from God’s hopes *for all*. A patient pastor, he loved those he served before he even knew them – and he trusted them by the same grace. And, together, he and that community grew in faith and number.²⁵

In all this, Ben – bone to blood, teeth to toes – **was a Christian**²⁶ ... just as he and his classmates had graffitied and daydreamed long before ... what many claim, some seem, and too few are.

As companions in the household of God, we, too, aspire *esse quam videri*.

For if we accept the privileges of our faith community [nodding to our Gospel’s promise (as one among so many) that “where two or three are gathered” in the name of Jesus, Christ is in the midst them²⁷], then we must honor the responsibilities of the same. To do anything less – whether wasting time and energy on our appearance rather than our substance ... complaining and criticizing rather than cooperating and supporting ... indulging gossip and innuendo rather than sharing truth and love – we allow the bruising, broken world to *harden* our hearts, rather than welcoming our loving God to *transform* our lives. That is, instead of allowing God to renew our hearts and unite us as a new humanity, we allow the world to coopt us and sharpen our divisions – oh, these are the very walls that Christ has torn down, that Jesus put to death!

Trinity Church, may Christ be our peace, and, as companions, let us pray! Devoting ourselves to one another as siblings of a common home, this “holy temple of God.”

As companions, let us serve! Walking alongside each other, within the life of our congregation and with our partners in the city.

As companions, let us eat! Breaking the bread and grilling the sausage, sharing the cup and passing the mustard.

As companions, let us hope! Tying balloons to the back porch and cranking the bubble machine, even with the skies scowl.

As companions, let us listen! Leaning into one another with the intensity of the Jedi, and moving in concert with the Force ... let us show up! Endeavoring constancy as a virtue and supporting the offerings of our parish ... let us sing! Joining “a chorus of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven,” cheering God’s Love ... Let us read! Joining bible studies and small groups (on Wednesday and Sundays, QR codes on the back of your Worship Booklets).

As companions, let us grow! Setting God’s dreams for Trinity and for the world before our own desires, day by day giving love and trust a try.

Esse quam videri – by all this, let us set ourselves to *being*, rather than *seeming*. For we have such a wonderful fall ahead! God is already making us the new creation that we and the world so urgently need, all by “the One whose power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”²⁸

That we would be companions in this household of God,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Which consumed R2-D2 in the Dagobah bog.

³ [Indeed](#).

⁴ Ephesians 2:11.

⁵ Matthew 18:17. “If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

⁶ Ephesians 2:12.

⁷ Ephesians 2:13.

⁸ Ephesians 2:14a.

⁹ Ephesians 2:14b.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:15. “He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace ...”

¹¹ Ephesians 2:20.

¹² [“I need a place to put my stuff.”](#)

¹³ Ephesians 2:15b-16.

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:17.

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:18.

¹⁶ More on Ephesians’ authorship to come during the introductory lecture on October 15.

¹⁷ Not matter whether Paul authored Ephesians or if a devotee of Paul wrote the epistle in the apostle’s name, the appeal to Paul’s theology is purposeful.

¹⁸ Galatians 3:28-29.

¹⁹ Choosing “Companion” to capture the spirit of chapter two’s vision of union in Christ.

²⁰ Ephesians 2:19.

²¹ ... not sure this phrase exists, but I mean contemporaries – “the saints militant,” in the old language.

²² And – Lord, have mercy – doesn’t the world need this?!

²³ Ephesians 2:22.

²⁴ One of earth’s great humans, Jackie served as the “Parish Secretary” at Saint Matthias – which meant she ran the show.

²⁵ Acts 2:47. This is how it works!

²⁶ *Seems* common, yet it is not.

²⁷ Matthew 18:20.

²⁸ Ephesians 3:20.