

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

September 15, 2024

Proper 20 (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.¹ *Amen.*

Today, our Ministry Council² invites you to join your Trinity Church friends in our congregation's many programs. The Council empowers parishioners, with the support of staff, to shape our ministries, rather than the other way around. For more than a year now, its five "Cohorts" – Finance, Facilities, & Administration; Hospitality & Care; Lifelong Formation; Outreach & Justice; Worship³ – have been coordinating to calendar our parish programs; nurturing to sunset ministries that have reached their faithful conclusion; and discerning new opportunities to fill identified ministry gaps.

Downstairs in the Commons and Lloyd Forum after our worship at this hour, the Cohorts will share stories and invite conversation about your energies and your interests. I hope you will make time to join this different take on the shop-worn "Ministry Fair." As our "Collect of the Day" voices, "while we are placed among things that are passing away," we at Trinity seek to "hold fast to [what] that shall endure."⁴

Accordingly, this is a sermon about why we do what we do, and, specifically, the role of scripture in that common life.⁵ For in everything we undertake – readying and gathering for worship; inviting and stirring companionship; arranging and offering education; organizing and serving our city; we embody our theology as characters and contributors to a vital "faith."

For a dozen years, a close friend of my family served as Rector of the Episcopal parish in Rome, Italy. In 2017, Missy, Michael, Ginna, and I lived in that congregation's rectory apartment for a portion of his summer back in the States. In return for the accommodations, I carried the congregation's "on-call" phone, resourced their staff, and led their Sunday services.⁶

While I can acknowledge some of those weeks' travails – the lice situation and theft of our cash and valuables likely the top vote-getters if you're asking my wife and children – the adventure remains magical in my memory. Given the singular opportunity, we had splurged and arranged for guides at the must-see spots, and those investments proved worth every denarius. And, at least as moving, we walked and walked and walked the city's fountains, parks, and plazas, stopping often to create our own tour itineraries.

Of the churches we visited along that way, San Luigi dei Francesi looks from the outside as much like a Roman government building as a sacred space. Despite the unassuming exterior, its

interior's Capella Contarelli boasts Michaelangelo Merisi de Caravaggio's first public commission: a spectacular triptych of Saint Matthew the Evangelist.

Left-to-right, the first of Caravaggio's paintings shines a light on Matthew seated in his "tax booth"⁷ at the very moment Jesus calls to him. The final work depicts Matthew at his martyrdom, an executioner looming over the fallen disciple.

At center above the Chapel's altar, Caravaggio imagines Matthew at work on his Gospel. An aged man with a balding head and gray beard, Matthew labors before a handsomely bound volume and receives dictation from an angel hovering over his shoulder. This heavenly muse tallies details on their fingers, counting them off to Matthew: *One ... and two ... and then ...*

On its surface,⁸ "The Inspiration of Saint Matthew" reinforces the stubborn, Western story about who wrote the Gospels and how: a solitary white guy with the Holy Spirit alighted on his pen. Christendom set the trajectory for that notion with the eponymous titles long-ago given the canonical books, and everywhere we turned in Rome, the iconography and statuary and relics continued to encourage loyalty to the special holiness of those individual authors and their lives – whether accounts testified in scripture (like "The Calling") or drawn from the Church's millennia of fanfiction (like "The Martyrdom").

Imagery of this sort – certainly not limited to that of The Eternal City; we can find plenty in our windows and on our walls here – fortifies the colloquial assumption that God wrote the Gospels. The four Evangelists may have pressed ink to paper, but the Holy Spirit guided their quills, jot and tittle. This attribution also reinforces God's hands-on direction of *all* cosmic affairs, devotions that distance readers' experiences from the Gospels' "story worlds"⁹ and present a static canon of a closed truth.

From last Sunday's reference to Paul Tillich's definitions of "belief" as "opinions held to be true," and "faith" as "being grasped" by the Divine, approaching scripture as flat and fixed [we might say, "everlasting" rather than "eternal"¹⁰ ... can you picture that difference?] leaves us only to "believe" or deny the bible. That binary fundamentally misunderstands the task of faith – or, to use Tillich's language, keeps us stuck in the preliminary and further separates us from the ultimate. Scripture intends to call Christian communities to encounter God, yet this cultural momentum pressures congregations to convene Sunday-morning town meetings for accepting the way things are as the way God has ordered them: "God said it, that settles it; God has completed the revelation."

The Ministry Council and our common life at Trinity Church push back on that wrongheadedness and enter a different stream of Christian practice and scriptural tradition.

Imagine the Gospels emerging from communities of everyday people – not so different from us – who spent time together, took care of one another, and wondered about their connections to God. These communities asked those existential questions – What does it mean to be alive? Why am I

here? How can I hope? – and found the teachings and life of Jesus as a peculiarly animating and inspiring witness. Some members of these earliest Christian congregations would have known Jesus personally and could accent their first-person tales with notes about a certain day’s weather, the smell of a town, the way he sighed. Some would have come from families who knew Jesus’ people or places. Others would have known Jesus only by the stories they heard and the life they shared in a community formed by his legacy.

These Gospel communities told stories about their history to understand their present and to inform their future. Lingering in the memory of events they identified as decisive, they could deliver flourishes for dependable laughs or gasps or coos. They recalled their sages and heroes and villains. Not so different from families and other social institutions, some tales they told often, and other stories they avoided altogether. While certain members spoke with influence and authority, no individual singularly authored their shared narrative, and the assemblies’ stories evolved as situations and constituencies changed.

Before long, certain events and details and words of Jesus felt important enough to record for posterity. Congregations curated local compendiums and shared the stories and sayings they had written with neighboring communities in the emerging movement. Those briefs returned with emendations the authoring congregation could choose to adopt, adapt, or abandon.

When fewer and fewer living companions of Jesus remained, energy increased to collect those resources and fashion them into a whole. The resulting Gospels each emphasized the stories most relevant to their respective congregation’s lived experience, most important to their sense of themselves, and most credible to the audience they hoped would inherit their Good News.

For us these thousands of years later, of course, we seek to understand the mechanics of Jesus healing a boy who could not speak¹¹ (in the verses immediately preceding today’s Gospel appointment). Of course, we interrogate Jesus’ insistence about the “Messianic Secret” and his desire to travel discretely.¹² Of course, we wrestle Jesus’ Passion predictions and empathize the disciples’ confusion.¹³ Of course, we take stock of our ambitions, and we research the place of children in the ancient world.¹⁴ Yet we must not mistake these questions and their answers as any end, as our access to a singular gnosis that Mark contains. Rather, these engagements must serve meaning making in our day and age and being – must inspire our connections to God in Christ, and not make us mere spectators of someone else’s.

The Evangelists – and by pluralizing that word I intend reference to the *community* of authors for each Gospel, and not the four long-bearded guys (despite my own hirsute silliness) – the actions and experiences of the Gospels’ authoring communities shaped their stories, and their stories, in turn, shaped their actions and experiences. **By their life together, they became characters and contributors to a vital, embodied theology.** We take up their theological process as a model for our own, studying and considering their faith in service of our life together as a parish family.

The ministries of Trinity Church provide sites for our meaning making, settings where we encounter difficult questions within a trusted cohort, where we encounter challenge, where we

find inspiration, where choose the Good, where we endeavor God's hopes for ourselves, where we make a difference for the Good News as we can, where we can, while we can. Yet, be sure they are not ends! Devoted as we remain to them, no ministry exists in isolation or has a purpose separated from its participation in our parish whole; all our worship and programs point back to the larger congregation, where we find our deepest connections to God and one another. Indeed, siloed programs bind themselves to what is "passing away," to arguments about which ministry or event or leader is or was "the greatest." The Ministry Council operationalizes our commitment to become part of something greater than ourselves, greater than our affinities and interests alone.

Returning to that topic paragraph: scripture energizes our common life at Trinity Church as we ready and gather for worship; invite and stir companionship; arrange and offer education; organize and serve our city; not simply to read or recall or "believe in" the Gospel stories, but *to become part of them* – to write the Gospel of our day – telling these and our treasured stories to understand our present and to inform our future; to embody our theology as characters and contributors to a vital faith.

Held in Common by these promises,
I pray;
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² [The Leadership Development Task Force recommended the creation of a Ministry Council in its 2020 report.](#)

³ [For more information about the ministries comprising each Cohort.](#)

⁴ Contemporary Collect for Proper 20, *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), p. 234.

⁵ And, unusually, a sermon rooted in our Program Year's launch and this Sunday's programs, rather than the day's appointed scriptures.

⁶ I got the better end of this trade!

⁷ Matthew 9:9.

⁸ As a colleague (and Caravaggio fan) recalled of the placard in Capella Contarelli, Caravaggio dressed some characters in the triptych as contemporary to his time, rather than Jesus' time. That strategy takes the scene out of the historical moment, an "eternal" flourish I do not account here.

⁹ From narrative theory, generally, and *Mark As Story* (Rhoads, et al, 1982), specifically, I like this term a lot – for me, it captures the fullness of the narrative universes the authoring communities created, worlds with tethers to history, but not bound entirely to historicity.

¹⁰ An important distinction, and one often noted by the Dean of the Cathedral of Saint Philip-Atlanta, the Very Rev. Sam Candler.

¹¹ Mark 9:16-29. In a dramatic scene, the boy's father describes his son as “[having] a spirit.”

¹² Mark 9:30.

¹³ Mark 9:31-32.

¹⁴ Mark 9:33-37.