

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

July 16, 2017

*VI Pentecost: Matthew 13:1-9, (10-13, 16-17), 18-23*

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good morning!

Man, it is good to be home: last week concluded the first leg of Good Shepherd's summer partnership with Saint Paul's Within The Walls of Rome, Italy, and, as of last Friday morning, the Reverend Christine Mendoza and her family are safe and sound in our fellow parish. Given the seven-hour difference in time zones, by now she has already preached her first sermon in *that* pulpit, and I look forward to hearing from her about her adventures.

In all, we, The Family Allen, travelled some 12,000 miles by air; a few hundred more by train; and, according to my Fitbit, some ninety-two miles by *foot*. While the experience will take more time to process fully, staying in the rectory apartment above the church and having the benefit of meaningful work mingled with our exploration and our play, we enjoyed a sense of *living* in Rome for a time, rather than only *visiting*. Though my initial, Griswold-ian pace did prompt my wife and children to sit me down for an intervention after three or four days of my hard-driving, generally, we did not engage Rome with a tourist's customary urgency. Instead, we lingered at sites that excited our imaginations, and, despite my *strong* preference for efficiency, we could even return for a second look, if we chose.

Further, the context of our parish partnership allowed us the privilege of offering, we pray, something *to* the Roman community, rather than only seeking to take what we could, while we could. Therefore, we met people we, otherwise, would not have met, and – even if in small measure – we caught a glimpse of their daily lives. Whether greeting parishioners after church, calling on the parish staff at their apartments, or entertaining our tour guides for a coffee or gelato, we spoke of more than only the summer's heat or the Colosseum's scale. We made a point of talking about the joys and challenges of life in our shared world, both as *we* know it here in fair Austin, Texas, and as *they* experience in their corner of Europe. In the images of this morning's parable, the pacing and purpose of the trip allowed our experience to find the best soil of our souls, and we are so grateful – *so grateful* – to have made the journey.

Of today's Gospel appointment, you may have noted the omission of the nine verses between the introduction of the parable and its explanation. Like the darkest passage of the catacomb that the tour doesn't explore, these omissions in our lectionary always invite my curiosity, and this morning's absented section is especially rich. As printed in your worship booklet, the break occurs between the two paragraphs, and I invite you to hear the missing passage with its adjoining sentences added on either side:

“...Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

*“Then the disciples...asked [Jesus], ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’*

*[Jesus] answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’...*

*“But blessed are your eyes, for they [do] see, and your ears, for they [do] hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.*

*“Hear then the parable of the sower...”<sup>i</sup>*

Like me, the disciples prefer efficiency, and they ask Jesus why he will not teach the crowds more simply and more directly. While what follows in our assigned Gospel explains the parable (and perhaps that explanation itself is a response to the disciples’ challenge of Jesus’ pedagogical strategy), in this omitted section, Jesus answers the more important question of *the disciples’ identity* in the story. That is, Jesus drives home the parable’s meaning in *their* lives, naming of them: “Blessed are *your* eyes, for they *do* see, and *your* ears, for they *do* hear.” That is, *Blessed are you of the good soil! In you the seed has been richly sown.*

Of course, simply being of the privileged soil – seeing and hearing the Good News – is not enough for God’s Kingdom to come.

Since our return, I have most often received the question of what I enjoyed most of Rome, to which I have named our visit to Saint Peter’s Basilica, and, more specifically, our climbing its dome. We had toured the Sistine Chapel and Vatican museums several days before, and as spectacular as I found the works of Michelangelo and Raphael and all the rest, by 9:00 in the morning, the Vatican crowds were just overwhelming. The museums’ hallways were a sea of tour phalanxes, grumpy children, and sharp elbows.

Just as I had finally found an uninterrupted view of the “The School of Athens”...and the world began to recede as I considered the mysteries of truth’s revelation...an unapologetic selfie-stick entered my visual frame; its camera phone spun on its axis; and, instead of taking a picture of the painting, the camera flashed in *my* face, presumably capturing the very moment I weighed the consequences of snapping that telescoping pole and defenestrating its attachment (and, possibly, its bearer).

When we left at lunchtime on that first visit, *Piazza di San Pietro* had become an annex of the sun’s surface – boiling hot – and the security queue stretched all the way across the square and beyond, with precious few finding shade. To beat those crowds (and to avoid melting), we arrived at 6:45 A.M. for our second trip to Vatican City, fifteen minutes before the basilica formally opened, and about an hour before guards granted access to the dome. As hot as the afternoon would be, that morning was cool and breezy, and there were well fewer than a hundred pilgrims with us as we entered the largest church in the world.

In the relative quiet, we watched the bustling criss-cross of vested priests and acolytes processing bread and wine to the many altars there, and, listening closely, we could hear the familiar calls and responses, “Lift up your hearts...We lift them up unto the Lord...” prayed in more languages than we could understand, but whose rhythms and actions we could immediately discern.

With the sacrament, then, on our ears (even if not on our lips), we began our ascent of the dome’s 551 steps. Now, 551 steps did not seem like that many to me before we started climbing, but, I gotta tell you, it’s a bunch! We climbed...and we climbed...and we climbed...until, with delighted surprise, about halfway up we entered the platform encircling Michelangelo’s interior cupola and its decorated dome. I don’t know what I expected to discover, but the mosaics and frescos were even more breathtaking up-close than they had been from down-below.

After taking our time with the cupola, we continued our climb, and we eventually found ourselves on an ante-level of the roof, the stratum even with the giant, stone statues towering above Saint Peter’s entrance. Looking around the stone backsides of Jesus, the disciples, and John the Baptist, we could see the piazza far below, and we lingered there, too, spending time in that level’s gift shop and refreshment stand operated by Roman Catholic sisters.

Finally, we reached the very top of the dome, the last stretches of which took us through a winding stairwell with steeply slanted walls that were only slightly wider than my shoulders. Feeling physically accomplished, the Vatican gardens and the city of Rome spilled out before us. For me, that moment – on the day before we would leave – carried a moving sense of summation: of our Roman adventure most immediately, but also of those impossible many years and faiths...and lives and dreams and beauties...upon which we stood and over which we looked. Indeed, blessed were *our* eyes, for they did see, and blessed were *our* ears, for they did hear: truly, we are the privileged soil.

Even so and as it had been for the disciples, simply *being* the privileged soil – seeing and hearing the Good News, and having God’s love sown in our lives – is not enough for the Kingdom to come. Whether seeing the great stretch of Rome from on high; or singing in the Reforming churches of Germany; or visiting the antebellum history of South Louisiana;<sup>ii</sup> or kneeling regularly at this Good Shepherd altar; God calls us to honor the responsibilities attendant to our blessings, seeking not to take what we can, while we can, but to sow God’s love wherever we are – very near, or very far – bearing fruit thirty-fold of what we have seen and heard and received...*sixty-fold...one-hundred-fold*, and more.

In the name of the God whose harvest is mercy and beauty and love,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 13:8-13, 16-17

<sup>ii</sup> The Good Shepherd Choir recently returned from their travel to Germany and the Czech Republic, marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther’s taking of his theses, and our Youth Missioners left this morning – commissioned from this service – to serve victims of flooding in the Baton Rouge area.