

Cornell William Brooks: Good morning. Now, for those of you who've arrived here today who may not be entirely convinced that it is a good morning, I'm going to say good morning again and I want you to say it loud enough for those who are not yet persuaded.

Cornell William Brooks: Good morning. It is an honor and a delight and a blessing to be in God's house on the Sabbath day. I begin with a word of appreciation. My very Southern grandmother, Mrs. Rosa Lee Prioleau taught me and told me to begin every sermon, every speech, every talk with the simple words. Thank you.

Cornell William Brooks: I extend a word of appreciation to the Reverend, Professor, Doctor Stephanie Paulsell for extending this invitation to the pulpit. Associates, to my friends at the Center for Public Leadership and across Harvard. To all of the students, all of the faculty, all of the staff and the leadership, but also extend a word of appreciation to the choir, because I have to share with you that choirs come in two varieties. The first of which, good choirs that is to say, the first good choir makes preaching easier. The second variety of choirs sing so well, so powerfully, so evocatively that they made preaching more difficult. I unfortunately followed behind the second such choir.

Cornell William Brooks: I'm delighted to be here, I particularly at this moment in the history of Harvard and the history of our country. We arrive in this sanctuary at this sacred hour amidst a generationally unprecedented level of activism, all across the length and breadth of this republic and around the world. We arrive at this sanctuary and a moment in history when a generation of students and activists have lifted their voices and have declared with a unity of spirit that black lives matter. Understanding profoundly that black lives matter is the moral predicate to the ethical conclusion that all lives matter.

Cornell William Brooks: Unless the first is true, then second can never be true. We arrive at this sanctuary at a moment in which students are taking to the streets, protesting against gun violence, protesting against children in camps. We arrive at this campus and in this sanctuary at a moment in which students are speaking with a powerful and clarion voice.

Cornell William Brooks: We arrive at this sanctuary at a powerful moment in history, one which we cannot take for granted. We cannot overlook, we cannot understate and underestimate the moral audacity of this moment. And yet I'm reminded that this is not merely an academic debate, not merely a social justice campaign taking place in our textbooks, in our classrooms, in lectures, at Starbucks. But it is a social justice campaign being waged by those who are affected by the debate.

Cornell William Brooks: Personally, may I share with you a humble little story about why I believe this to be true? A few years ago I found myself as president of the NAACP, a large civil rights organization. I spent 90% of my time on an airplane, but I'm also the father, the daddy of two college aged sons.

Cornell William Brooks: So in the midst of my travels, I called my oldest son, who was named after me in college and I called him up and I get voice mail. I call again. I don't get a text. I called him and yet again. I called him yet again and finally he picked up the phone and he's whispering to me and I'm not quite sure I understand him and I said "Son, what's going on?" He said, "Well dad, I really don't have time to talk with you." I said, "Well, son, you know, dad's kind of busy too."

Cornell William Brooks: I spent a little time on the airplane. I'm involved with very important work and my son says me, "Shhh." I said, "Well son, it's not entirely appropriate to tell your dad, shhhh." My son says to me, "Well dad, I can't really talk to you right now because we've just taken over the President's office at Amherst College." I said to my son, "Son, can't this be just the one time when you do as I say instead of doing as I do."

Cornell William Brooks: This is a family conversation. It's a conversation about the most important social justice challenges of our time and we're deeply affected as people. We're not mere political combatants. We're not mere moral interlocutors. We are people; men and women, brothers and sisters, gay and straight and trans and bi, black and white, Asian and Latino. We are children of God engaged in a moral enterprise.

Cornell William Brooks: And so on this Sunday, I just wanted to turn to a bit of scripture full of guidance as to how we relate to one another, how we love one another, how we care for one another in this difficult moment.

Cornell William Brooks: Read in your hearing where these words found in the book of John 8:1-11. There we find these words.

Cornell William Brooks: Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Now, early in the morning, he came into the temple and all the people came to him and he sat down and he taught them. Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought to him a woman caught in adultery and when they had set her in the midst, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery in the very act."

Cornell William Brooks: Now Moses in the law commanded us that such should be stoned, but what do you say? Then they said to him, "Testing him that they might have something of which you accused him." But Jesus stooped down, wrote on the ground with his finger as though he did not hear. So when they continued asking him, he raised himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." And again, he stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest, even to the last and Jesus was left and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised himself up, saw no one but the woman, he said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?"

Cornell William Brooks: She said, "No one Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more."

Cornell William Brooks: I just like to lift up for your hearing, a few words of encouragement concerning the courage to love campus conflict and controversy. The courage to love campus conflict and controversy.

Cornell William Brooks: Typically preachers have three points. I really have two and a half points. The first of which is we are the center of the what. We are the center of the debate. We are the center of the deliberations. We are the center of the confrontation, the conflict and the controversies. We are in the center of the work.

Cornell William Brooks: The second point is quite simple. If we're close enough to debate, we're close enough to love. If we're close enough to oppose one another intensely, we're close enough to one another to care for one another even intimately. The last half point is quite simply the courage to love.

Cornell William Brooks: The scripture is found in this powerful pricepi , in which we find Jesus having spent time in the temple, he's in the temple courts. He's on the campus, if you will, of the temple. You all understand that that the temple of the first century, the temple was this place of teaching and instruction and learning and moral and intellectual curiosity. The temple was, if you will, a moral universe.

Cornell William Brooks: Jesus was on the campus in the temple and there he encounters a group of scholars, if you will, distinguished scholars. They may have qualified to teach at the Harvard Divinity School or the Harvard Law School, law scholars, moral scholars, perhaps scholars of government and they do something odd as a matter of pedagogy. They bring exhibit A, of their debate. They're having a question as to what is the appropriate punishment for adultery, for one of the participants in the adulteress act, note that my brothers. So they bring exhibit A, a woman caught in the act of adultery and they asked Jesus what to do as a matter of punishment.

Cornell William Brooks: We appreciate this in the midst of this era of mass incarceration, in this midst of this era of collateral sanctions and three strikes and you're out. We appreciate this discussion in a week which a man received a last minute reprieve so that we might consider new evidence after spending 20 years behind bars.

Cornell William Brooks: So they bring this woman into the midst of Jesus, in the midst of the crowd. And that speaks to us because we are in the middle of the what? In the midst of our most intense and raging debates about social justice, they all revolve around law and policy, but also human beings, flesh and blood humanity.

Cornell William Brooks: You recall that in the midst of a debate around immigration and migrants in camps, we had a first year student at Harvard that we were worried about whether or not he would arrive on time to take his class picture and register for

classes. This is not merely about debating what's on our Twitter feed and Instagram or Facebook, but it's about real people.

Cornell William Brooks: So they bring the woman and place her in the midst. We don't understand and we don't fully know about her intersectional identities. They say that she was an adulterer, translated into 21st century parlance, she was a convict. She was a felon. She was already convicted. They bring her into the midst. Her body is at the center of the debate.

Cornell William Brooks: There are times in which I wonder if at Harvard we realize that their bodies in the middle of the debate. When we talk about immigration, we talk about folks who are illegal and undocumented, those students walk among us. When we talk about LGBTQ issues, we have folks in that community walking in our midst. When we talk about racism and systemic racism, they are folks affected by the discourse in our myths. When we talk about the intransigence of students or the intransigence of faculty or staff, they are folk who are intransigent in our midst.

Cornell William Brooks: May I share with you as a student at Boston University School of Theology during the days of Apartheid South Africa, I had it in my spirit to hang out a gigantic banner outside of my dorm window. Divest now. I went to bed that night feeling proud of myself.

Cornell William Brooks: I woke up the next morning and there was a little letter that had been slipped under my door. Dear Mr. Brooks, unless you remove that sign, you will be evicted from university housing.

Cornell William Brooks: Now. This didn't sit well with me, but the reason it didn't sit well with me, it was not merely because I oppose the administration's policies with respect to investing in South Africa. It didn't sit well with me because no one asked me how I felt about it. I felt bullied. I felt intimidated. I felt pressured, but that's true then and it may be true now.

Cornell William Brooks: Sometimes students feel bullied and pressured and intimidated, but guess what? Now that I've joined the faculty, I realize the faculty feel the same. Keep that to yourselves. I appreciate this. This is a congregation that will operate with some discretion. They're bodies in the midst of our most raging debates and so how we debate, how we discuss, how are we morally deliberate has everything to do with the bodies in our midst.

Cornell William Brooks: The adulterer, the felon, the convict who was brought into the midst of Jesus, was in a state of distress. She understood and appreciated what could happen to her. She was in a place of naked vulnerability. What about how we find ourselves in the midst of some of these discussions and debates? Do we find ourselves robed in our own naked vulnerability? If someone tasks a stone of of meanness or contempt or anger or patronizing spirit, do we do we feel naked in our vulnerable?

Cornell William Brooks: Nobody need nod your head, lift your hand, or say amen. But I believe that if we think about the bodies in our midst, professorial bodies, student bodies, administrative bodies, leader bodies, president of the university body, newly elected president and vice president of the undergraduate council bodies, black bodies, brown bodies, Latino bodies, Asian bodies, native bodies, immigrant bodies, violated bodies, traumatized bodies; people who laugh and sing and cry and explain. Professors who come to class right after a diagnosis of breast cancer. Students who arrive on this campus worried about how they're going to get to the end of the semester.

Cornell William Brooks: People; bodies wrapped in conscience and conviction, human frailty and vulnerability. We, on the midst of the what?

Cornell William Brooks: Second little lesson of this text is if we close enough to debate intensely, we may be just close enough to care for one another even intimately. You recall that Jesus has brought this woman, the legal scholars and the religious scholars must have prided themselves of having boxed Jesus in. Jesus was well aware of the fact that according to the mosaic law, a woman being caught in the act of adultery was subject to the death penalty without the protection of the eighth amendment, which doesn't operate too well in the 21st century.

Cornell William Brooks: They also knew that Jesus exercise an abundance of compassion. He was a touchy feely kind of kind of soul. They knew that that by posing the question it might get Jesus in trouble with his base. I can tell nobody understands that. Sometimes as leaders we take positions that we need to take and if we compromise just a little bit, we could get in trouble with our base. Have you ever read something in the Crimson and you know that the statement and the position may be a little more nuanced than the press statement or the tweet? Anybody that experience? By myself.

Cornell William Brooks: They boxed Jesus in, but Jesus was close enough to this woman to be overwhelmed by compassion. The text says that Jesus stooped on the ground, didn't have a whiteboard and began to scribble. Maybe he was trying to play for some time, but he wrote on the ground. Text doesn't tell us what he wrote. We know from studying in the scripture that the capital punishment that was to be applied to this woman according to the book of Exodus, was written by the finger of God.

Cornell William Brooks: So Jesus, maybe he's imitating. He writes something on the ground, but he's close enough to this woman to have compassion and to say to those who are prepared to kill her, to stone her to death, "He without sin cast the first stone." Jesus made a moral determination, a moral judgment, without being life and death judgemental.

Cornell William Brooks: What happens when we decline to be judgmental, even when we're brave enough to make moral judgments? See when you decline to be judgmental it

means you are open to the moral possibility that a person might actually change.

Cornell William Brooks: Anybody have mothers and fathers? Have you ever noticed that the more they grow, the more they mature, the more they change. In other words you, you have an effect on them. Children raise parents as well as parents raising children. Again, I can tell that's not clear. Thank you.

Cornell William Brooks: I need that and antiphonal call and response. Again, my oldest son trying to tweak the family's vocabulary around the dinner table. We were talking and he used the term heteronormative and so I said to him, "Son, and when you talk to grandma, grandma's on board with that but you may have to like tweak her vocabulary because she not quite there yet." We as a family concerned about social justice, raise one another up. Sometimes we have to be patient. Sometimes we have to be a little forgiving. Sometimes we have to be a little loving. Sometimes we need to be a little nurturing and allow ourselves to grow closer together, to come closer together. You see, because this text makes clear that even as we debate intensely, this was an intense debate. Bear in mind, the outcome of the debate meant the life or death of the object of the debate. But Jesus made it clear that the object of the debate was also the subject of the moral discourse.

Cornell William Brooks: So when we're close together, when we care enough about one another to not merely ask, "What's your point?" But ask, "How are you doing?" When we're close enough together to not merely seek to persuade, but seek to care, seek to love and yes, can I say this to faculty and staff? It will not hurt you and I, I'm pretty sure there's no violation of the Harvard bylaws to just tell students every once in a while, I care about you. Are you happy? Are you doing well here? Do you like it? Are the people treating you right?

Cornell William Brooks: You see, because when we demonstrate love and affection and show our humanity, people understand that we're all walking through this life together. So Jesus declines to engage in a judgmentalism; tells this woman that he's close to that go and sin no more.

Cornell William Brooks: Now you should note what Jesus didn't do. He didn't say, "Okay, what are you going to do next in terms of reconciling yourself to the community?" He didn't give her a plan for how to make amends and be accepted by her neighbors. He left that to the community. We too have some unanswered questions.

Cornell William Brooks: When people walk away from a fight having lost, how do we assure them they're having lost, we've not mourned your expense. What do we do when people feel excluded? How do we discuss freedom of speech while not excluding the moral possibility of the responsibility of inclusion?

Cornell William Brooks: How do we, as a campus, as a student body and this far-flung decentralized place called Harvard, how do we talk about being together and connecting with one another? The text speaks to that.

Cornell William Brooks: Last point I want to leave you with is the courage to love. You see when Jesus declined to apply the mosaic law, he took a risk in terms of running a foul of the religious authorities. Had he answered in the affirmative, he might have run a foul of the Roman authorities, but he demonstrated a certain courage and when it comes to loving one another, it takes courage.

Cornell William Brooks: It takes courage to open yourself. It takes courage to admit you're wrong. It takes courage to admit that you may not be the most brilliant person on every point of discussion, even at Harvard University. It takes courage to open yourself up and love people, care for people, extend your arms to others, to share tears when somebody else's shedding tears, to smile when they're smiling, to be vulnerable and open.

Cornell William Brooks: It takes courage, particularly when our debates are the most rancorous. I'll leave you with this modest little story about the power of love.

Cornell William Brooks: As president of the NAACP, I conceived of this March from Selma to Washington DC, in part to oppose police brutality. It was a march of a thousand miles in 43 days across five states. A grueling march; 95 to 100 degree heat. In Selma, I met a man whose chosen name was Middle Passage. He was 70 years old, a veteran of the Navy, a veteran of the Vietnam War. He told me he wanted to walk the entire distance from Selma to DC and not only that, he wanted to carry the American Flag every step of the way.

Cornell William Brooks: What I've discovered about Middle was his loving attitude and approach and philosophy. When we encountered police officers who are not entirely happy about guarding and babysitting the NAACP, Middle went out of his way to be loving and affectionate and caring, talking to the good old boys, talking to people who might've been police by day and clan by night.

Cornell William Brooks: Middle had this loving spirit and he carried the American Flag as a testament to his love for his country even though he opposed and confronted the injustice in his country.

Cornell William Brooks: So we marched for 900 miles. We came to a little place called Spotsylvania, Virginia, with Middle carrying the flag nearly every step of the way, at 78 years of age. We got the Spotsylvania, Virginia, having carried the flag. When it stormed, when it rained, Middle wrapped up the flag but when the rain stopped, the clouds parted, the sun came out, the blue sky was visible, Middle unfurled the flag, and when he did, he collapsed to the pavement.

Cornell William Brooks: My hardest day at the NAACP was the day that Middle did not come back from the hospital. I had to explain to a group of students that Middle died carrying

the flag and opposing injustice but the hardest question I was ever asked at the NAACP was posed by students who said, "If a man was willing to die opposing police misconduct and die for the right to vote, why can't we fight for the right to vote and vote?"

Cornell William Brooks: Middle died demonstrating sacrificially his love for his country, but his love for his country did not mean he declined to engage, even those he opposed, to be tied to even those he vigorously objected to, in terms of the way they treated black bodies.

Cornell William Brooks: So I want to just say to you this semester, look within your hearts. Look deep within the scriptures and find the courage to love and if by chance anybody grows discouraged, and want to leave you with these few words that have inspired me to love when I would much rather done otherwise. The words are these.

Cornell William Brooks: Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring. Ring with the harmonies of Liberty; let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies. Let it resound loud as the rolling sea. Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past past has taught us. Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us; facing the rising sun of our new day begun. Let us march on. Let us march on. Let us march on till victory is won.

Cornell William Brooks: Amen.