

Steph Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Steph Grossano:

And welcome to Morning Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Today, we continue with our Senior Talks, and our speaker today is Fez Zafar. He's a senior in Dunster House. Our service will begin with a responsive reading of Psalm 85. Please rise, in body or spirit, as we read it responsively by whole verse. "You have been gracious to your land, O God, you have restored the good fortune of Jacob."

Congregation:

"You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and blotted out all their sins."

Steph Grossano:

"I will listen to what you are saying, for you are speaking peace to your faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to you."

Congregation:

"Truly, your salvation is very near to those who fear you, that your glory may dwell in our land."

Steph Grossano:

"Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other."

Congregation:

"Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven."

Steph Grossano:

"You, O God, will indeed grant prosperity, and our land will yield its increase."

Congregation:

"Righteousness shall go before you, and peace shall be a pathway for your feet."

Steph Grossano:

Please be seated.

Choir:

(singing).

Fez Zafar:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Fez Zafar:

I was 16 years old when a teacher introduced me to my hometown's last Holocaust survivor. 91-year-old David Wolnerman was a Polish-American who had endured five years at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dachau. In one of our early conversations, he unfolded his sleeve and revealed the numbers on his arm. 163044. These six numbers represented cruelty and despair, but also a resolve to survive. Their sum was 18, which, as he explained, in Hebrew, means [Hebrew 00:06:00], to live. As David shared stories of his life's journey, I realized that he chose to live his life by forging bonds with people of different ethnicities and cultures. The friendship we quickly formed, that of an elderly Muslim... I'm sorry, an elderly Jew and a Muslim teenager, was only one example. Despite experiencing the worst of humanity, he chose to see the best in people, and embrace the values of civility and discourse.

He was very proud of my acceptance to Harvard, you see, as he never had the opportunity to receive an education, yet he taught me the lesson that has benefited me the most during my four years here: to seek out classmates of different backgrounds, to listen to their stories, and welcome our differences as opportunities to learn about one another from one another, the ultimate pursuit of [Latin 00:07:02]. And Harvard has cultivated the community that has allowed me to do so. Through organized walks with friends during the pandemic, passionate debates in the halls of Sever, and conversations in dining halls, from my beloved Dunster to Currier, this university, as a home, has empowered us to live in the way that David knew best, by building bridges in spite of our differences.

The last time I visited him was just days before the fall semester. Soon after I returned to campus, David passed away at the age of 96. In the following months, as our university became enveloped in an atmosphere of division and discord, I found myself thinking about our friendship. Inspired by his example, I sought to restore the broken bonds that existed on campus. Just a few weeks ago, I worked with a diverse group of undergraduates to organize a university-wide dinner in Dunster's dining hall, in celebration of unity. Students of different faiths, cultures, races, countries, and political backgrounds came together to break bread. At a certain point in the evening, I gazed upon the community that I'd gathered to dine, laugh, and reflect together. In that instant, it was clear to me that, at least in this room, the unity our campus had lost, for just a moment in its 388-year history, was vibrant and strong.

In just four weeks, many of us will celebrate the conclusion of our collegiate journey, but the greatest lesson we have learned at Harvard extends far beyond the classroom. It does not exist in a summer internship, a Pre-Professional club, or even CS50, but in the relationships, the conversations, and even the gestures of kindness and solidarity among us that we will always remember. I want to share with you a verse that is quoted in the Holy Book of Islam, the Quran, which says, "Hold fast to the rope of God all together and be not divided." This verse is a reminder of the importance of holding on to the family, the community, and our society.

On this occasion, I'm thinking about my Jewish friend, David, who would've been very proud to sit here. While we were separated by two generations and two faiths, we were united in our common belief of unity among religions, unity among differences. I'm reminded of the way in which he embraced the number 18, [Hebrew 00:09:58], and chose to live. Indeed, perhaps it is a sign that the numbers on the day of our commencement this year, 5/23/2024, have a sum of 18. So, in the spirit of [Latin 00:10:15], let us live united. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Steph Grossano:

Will you join me in prayer? Loving God, God of all, our hearts break for the ways that violence has been done to people in the name of their identities, in the name of their religions, for all the ways that dehumanization has reigned. But we are grateful that there is another way. We are grateful for the path of love that you have shown us, for the moments of unity that we experience, even across our differences. And we pray today that you open our eyes and you open our hearts, that we may see ourselves in one another, and we may experience the oneness that you have promised. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Steph Grossano:

And together, let us pray as Jesus taught His disciples. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

Congregation:

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Steph Grossano:

Please rise, in body or spirit, as we sing Hymn 200, I to the hills will lift mine eyes.

Congregation:

(singing).

Steph Grossano:

As we go into this day, may we remember that in the goodness of God, we were born into this world. By the grace of God, we have been kept all the day long, even unto this very hour. And by the love of God, we are being made whole. Go in peace, amen.

Congregation:

Amen.