

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

[Music 00:00:01] Good morning. Welcome to Morning Prayers. Our speaker today this morning is Elizabeth Montgomery. And I must say, since I've been at Mem Church, it has been an honor to work with such an amazing colleague. So I'm excited to have you this morning to hear from you, Elizabeth. All who are able, please stand for our responsive breathing. In your black psalter, we will be reading Psalm 98. Sing to the Lord a new psalm for he has worked wonders. His right hand, his holy arm has won him victory.

The Lord has manifested his victory, has displayed his triumph in the sight of the nations. He was mindful of his steadfast love and faithfulness toward the house of Israel. All the end of the earth beheld the victory of our God. Raise a shout to the Lord all the earth. Break into joyous hums of praise. Sing praise to the Lord with a lyre, with a lyre and melodious song. With trumpets and the blast of the horn raise a shout before the Lord, the king.

Let the sea and all within it thunder, the world and its inhabitants; let the rivers clap their hands, the mountains sing joyously together at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to rule the earth. He will rule the world justly, and its peoples with equity. You may be seated.

[Singing ]

Elizabeth Montgomery:

Good morning. Several years ago when my children were small, my predecessor Jan Randolph gifted our family with the beautiful children's book Old Turtle by Douglas Wood. The following is a short excerpt from his book where the beings of the world are debating about how to describe God. "She is a great tree," murmured the willow. "A part of the world, always growing and always giving." "You are wrong," argued the island. "God is separate and apart. God is like the shining sun far above all things," said the blue sky.

"No. He is a river who flows through the very heart of things," thundered the waterfall. "She's a hunter," roared the lion. "God is gentle," chirped the robin. "He is powerful," growled to bear. The Memorial Church is a really special place. I suspect most, if not all of us here this morning, would agree with that statement. It has a deep place in many of our hearts and lives. I know it does in mine. It's not only my church, but also my workplace. And as such, part of my job is to answer questions about the church.

On Sunday mornings, the yard sees a large number of visitors and we get a lot of questions. They want to know what kind of church it is, what do we do here, is the church for students, are we open to the public. For the most part, these are all questions that we can answer in facts. We're a Protestant Church. We hold regular Sunday worship services. We host student services, and we provide student programming. But when I think about the Memorial Church and what I want others to know about this place, facts feel sort of flat and somehow incomplete.

In my heart, I've always wanted to have a few sentences about this place that captures what it is, but I've always struggled with finding the right words. I find this place really hard to define. It's a unique place. By definition, unique means remarkable, special, one of a kind, and the Memorial Church is all of those things. It feels like both a being and a place. It is certainly much more than this physical building. And like a living being, it is constantly changing and growing as it should.

What took me a while to understand and comprehend is that this place has an astonishing way of growing and changing and being exactly what it needs to be in each moment, each situation, and for each person over and over and over again. This church can weave together seemingly unconnected lives, people, actions, and events in ways and channels that in the moment make you shake your head.

It's these type of remarkable moments, no matter how many times they happen, never fail to bewilder me every single time.

Honestly, they can sometimes take my breath away. Nearly every year in August, the staff of the Memorial Church gathers for a staff retreat. We look towards the coming year and it's a day where we can come together after the summer months. We can reconnect, talk about our thoughts and goals, and prepare to welcome back the students and the congregation. Many years ago in one of those retreats, the question was put to the staff, what is the Memorial Church?

We were instructed not to overthink, just simply write. We're given a couple of minutes, and then we went around the table sharing what we had written. Since I already knew I couldn't come up with a narrative, I just made a list. Memorial Church. It's a place for students, a place for prayer and a place for music, a place for worship and to ask questions, a place to be married and baptized, a place to be silent, a place to study, a place to rest, a place to be together, and a place to start the day.

It's a place to be hugged and a place to be heard and to speak out. As the years have gone by, my list continues to grow. The Memorial Church is a place to love and to cry and to grieve and learn and to laugh, to do hard work, to grow, to have fun, and to feel, and to trust, and to fight hope. In Old Turtle, the debate between the earth beings is settled by some wise and simple words from old turtle. He gently and lovingly explains to his friends that God is all of those things. He is all of their words.

Hmm, well, maybe it's okay that I can't come up with a pocket reply to describe this place. Maybe it's okay that I can only come up with a list of words. On their own, each of the words on this list are just simple words, love, prayer, music, rest, trust, hope. But they are simple words that together describe something remarkably enormous and good. And perhaps simple words are a good way to describe this place, and I just need to trust God and watch God to fill in the rest.

For me, the Memorial Church is all of those simple words. This one of a kind, special, unique place. How would you share what's in your heart and what this place means to you?

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

Please rise for prayer all who are able. Let us pray. God, we're thankful for the simple words that describe this place. We're grateful for every day, every opportunity that we can come here to gather as a community, to pray, sing, be silent, meditate in this place called the Memorial Church. We are grateful. Amen. Now, let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples saying, 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 the evil one. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, amen. Now let us sing together hymn number 142 found in your hymnal entitled Eternal Lord of Love, Behold Your Church.

[Music]

As we leave this place, but never away from God's presence, may you go out into the world with gratitude, thankful for a place to come to gather together in community. Go in peace. Amen.