

Steph Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Steph Grossano:

And welcome to Morning Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Julia Shephard. She's a sophomore at Harvard College. Welcome. Our service this morning will begin with a responsive reading of Psalm 103, which is found in your Black Appleton Psalter book. Please rise, in body or spirit, as we read the psalm responsively by whole verse. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, all my being, His holy name."

Congregation:

"Bless the Lord, my soul; and do not forget all His bounties."

Steph Grossano:

"He forgives all your sins, heals all your diseases."

Congregation:

"He redeems your life from the pit, surrounds you with steadfast love and mercy."

Steph Grossano:

"The Lord executes righteous acts and judgments for all who are wronged."

Congregation:

"He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the children of Israel."

Steph Grossano:

"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love."

Congregation:

"He will not contend forever, or nurse His anger for all time."

Steph Grossano:

"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor has He requited us according to our iniquities."

Congregation:

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love to those who fear Him."

Steph Grossano:

"As east is far from west, so far has He removed our sins from us."

Choir:
(singing).

Julia Shephard:

I'm going to read an excerpt of the Gettysburg Address. "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." I'll skip a bit. Lincoln goes on to talk about the sacrifice of Union soldiers. He says, "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is rather for us to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to the cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion, that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from this earth."

I immigrated to the US when I was eight, and I learned that the Gettysburg Address was possibly the most sacred speech in American history. It was written in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln to commemorate the Battle of Gettysburg, the Civil War battle that turned the tides towards Union victory. Just 272 words long, it articulated principles meant to be fundamentally American; freedom and equality for all, no matter your race, no matter your background.

This spring break, I went to Gettysburg on a road trip with friends. We stood in the graveyard where Lincoln gave his speech and read the Gettysburg Address, which is engraved there on a monument, and we felt inspired. It's one thing to read a speech like Lincoln when you're nine or 10, it's another to be 19, realize how many empty 272 word paragraphs you've written in your life, and contrast those with one that shaped a nation.

But here's the thing. To get to Lincoln's monument in Gettysburg, you have to walk into the graveyard. And at the front of that graveyard stands a Freemason monument declaring that the Civil War entailed two sides faithfully supporting the respective governments under which they lived. About a block away, a store is flying a Confederate flag. Another sells tourist merchandise at eye level, and hats with Southern Crosses of Honor on a hidden shelf at the top. And right next to the Airbnb we stayed at, a house with a no solicitors sign is flying a Black American flag. That means take no prisoners, take no quarter. In other words, use violence against your political opponents.

Now, to be fair about the last one, Gettysburg is in the middle of rural Pennsylvania. And everyone we interacted with within the town who had anything to do with the history of the place, museum workers, tour guides, were hugely knowledgeable about the causes and effects of the war. It was about slavery, that it had huge effects on the nation. But the store owner flying a Confederate flag in Gettysburg, which, is worth noting, was not part of the Confederacy, was not doing so 15 years ago, according to everyone we asked, and they're not doing that for historical reasons.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that Confederate iconography has been co-opted by movements against our current system of government, as well as white nationalists. But it's worth noting that the political forces that use those symbols are rising right now. They represent a threat that is going to continue to mount in the next six months, and come to a head in a November election. And I know so many people, especially young people, who feel hopeless or apathetic about the outcome of that ballot, to the point of barely believing in their vote. It is very easy, think it might be the most natural, instinctive conclusion, to look at parts of our country and feel despair. I felt this in Gettysburg.

But the Gettysburg Address says that when we are faced with the great task of overcoming national evil, we should dedicate ourselves to that great task. That doing so honors the dead. And the ethic of faith

that pervades Christianity says that when we see cataclysms impending, we have spiritual obligations to do something about them. I have spent now over a week grappling with some of the dismay that I felt upon leaving Gettysburg. I want to share two things that I think we can and should act upon.

I think the first is doing what Jesus did; that we should live with love. That we should take advocating for others as a point of pride. That we should strive to create communities around us where no one would ever feel like they need to fly a take-no-quarter flag. So many people around us feel like the realm of politics, a realm that has the power to make so many people's lives better, is filled with exploitation, enforced obligations, or bureaucratic bloat. We give life to the idea that we can live together democratically, free and equally, when we act prosocially and when we talk to each other about the issues that matter to us. That doesn't mean backing down from the ideological building blocks of democracy, and it doesn't mean playing nice with the store owners in Gettysburg. But it does mean working across seeming differences, and painting a case to everyone that a prosocial democracy is something that they can inhabit.

And the second thing I think we can do is to do what Lincoln said. Ensure that our government, by the people and for the people, does not perish. Better memory keepers than we know that as far from a utopia as we are, there is nothing guaranteed about living in a free and democratic state that respects the dignity of all. There is a reason that thousands of Russians last week voted at noon to protest the dictatorship of Vladimir Putin. It matters both that we celebrate democracy while we have it, that we vote when possible, that we encourage everyone we know to vote when possible, that we do so with a sense of duty and purpose, and that we directly fight political evil.

Like many of my peers, I am dissatisfied with how much a ballot in Massachusetts actually matters come the presidential election. But our social ties are not restricted to this state or any state. And together, our voices are not small. We have time to talk to friends and relatives about the issues that matter, and to press for things that are truly political imperatives at every turn. In short, I think that we together have the power to dedicate ourselves to the proposition of continuing a government and improving a government for the people and by the people. This morning, I pray we do not forget it.

Steph Grossano:

Will you pray with me? Loving God, we despair of the ways our political system is divided. We despair of the ways our society is still ravaged by racism and many other forms of dehumanization. But we know that you showed us a way of love that overcomes these sorts of divisions, that speaks back against this sort of dehumanization. And we pray today that we may be filled with the love and with the action to repair these wounds. We pray this in your name, amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Steph Grossano:

And now 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:

"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."

Steph Grossano:

Please rise, in body or spirit, as we sing hymn number 344, Precious Lord, Take My Hand.

Congregation:

(singing).

Steph Grossano:

On this day, may you act justly, may you love mercy, may you walk humbly with God. Go in peace.
Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.