

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

Welcome to our daily service of morning prayers. We're so grateful that you are here this morning. Our speaker this morning is Marla Frederick, the Dean of Harvard Divinity School. Thank you so much for being with us this morning. All who are able, please rise in body and spirit as we read from the Psalter, Psalm 23, and we will read responsibly. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."

Rev. Jones and Congregation:

"He maketh me to my lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters."

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in straight paths for his namesake.

Congregation:

Yea, though I walk through the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and staff they comfort me.

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou has anointed my head with oil. My cup runneth over.

Congregation:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my live and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

You may be seated.

Choir:

(singing).

Dean Marla Frederick:

Absolutely beautiful. Thank you. Good morning, Memorial Church.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Dean Marla Frederick:

It is a joy to see so many familiar faces and so many new faces. It is particularly an honor for me to have President Gay here this morning. She is the one who actually appointed me dean of the Harvard Divinity School, and so it is a privilege to be here this morning. As some of you may know, I'm an anthropologist in part, and so I like to tell stories. Allow me to offer a story that reflects my prayer for you this morning.

This past weekend, my sister and I met in South Carolina at the home of my parents. This is an unusual way for me to describe returning home, which I would normally describe by saying my sister and I went to visit my parents, but there was no visiting. There was no reunion. There was only remembering. As some may know, I lost both of my parents this past school year. My father passed in August of '23 and my mother in January of '24, the day after she attended my welcome reception at Harvard Divinity School. Both died unexpectedly in their sleep.

There's nothing quite like death to cause one to reconsider life, its meaning, its purpose. So instead of the normal laughter and parental instruction about doing this for that, debate with my parents about religion and politics, the weekend was filled with reminiscing. My sister and I embarked upon the long and difficult journey of clearing their things, organizing their papers and making sense of the order they had created, which for us brought with it both sadness and joy. We found pictures and journals, stories of a family built over 57 years of marriage. We rummaged through my mother's wedding book, where she wrote about her excitement at marrying my father, the day he proposed, without a ring she added, because he couldn't afford one and how bittersweet it was to have a lovely reception but one she barely had a chance to enjoy because they took the traditional swirl through town to celebrate, a tradition long since passed.

It was heartwarming to read of their love story, to view pictures of their relationship in bloom, the business they built together and their cultivation of a young family. Found in these files and ephemera in essence is a story of hope and possibility. But at the heart of their story is a story about faith, struggle and finding one's purpose. It is a simple story, but one that we each must commit to every day, especially as we start a new school year with new hopes and new possibilities lying ahead. My parents' faith was the foundation of their lives. Their story in so many ways is a reminder of the power of religion for good in the world. When I look back on their lives, I'm reminded of important life lessons. I hope you enjoy sitting with me through a few of them as I start my very first school year ever with them as angels instead of in-person guides.

My mother cultivated an ethos that was apparent throughout her life, firmly grounded in faith she held as the biblical scriptures described so innocuously yet so poignantly, no respect of persons. She believed that character was the measure of a person, not the size of their bank account, the position they held or the skin they lived in. Character alone determined her judgment. It was a peculiar way to be raised because in many ways she shunned the very things that so many gravitate towards, wealth, prestige, notoriety. She lived simply to do right by her family, her friends and her community, whether serving as a teacher for years, a guardian at Lytton for young people in the foster care system, a poll worker during election season, or a prayer partner for those suffering illness and disease. Great lives I learned from her are built from faithfulness to the mundane duties of everyday life that often operate in service to others.

My father taught me more about vision casting, imagining the world better than we arrived. Raised in rural South Carolina, he held a cautious optimism about the promise of democracy if we would all truly commit to it. In graduate school at Atlanta University, he and his friends would listen to their professors flex eloquently about the importance of investing in their communities. And on the weekends they would go and hear Martin Luther King Jr. preach and participate in the rallies held in the area. His exposure there helped set his mind to the types of community work he invested in, sitting on local boards, ensuring the equitable distribution of city resources and opportunities for those historically disenfranchised and using his business degree to create jobs for the Black community as his instructors

insisted. At times, he would lament my generation's lack of investment in local community service and on local community boards, reminding me that the work of building a better world, a just world, was not complete. "You must keep your foot on the gas," he would say.

Finally, together they taught me a deep connection to our shared legacy of faith. They were constantly encouraged by the stories of those who went before them. They reveled as I do now in the stories of those whose lives provided a testament of hope. Through books, magazines, documentaries, newspaper clippings that my mom would send faithfully, they reveled in the stories of the greats. I had an opportunity the other week to read a collection of sermons by Reverend C.T. Vivian, one of the most consequential leaders of the civil rights movement, a friend of King and one whom King described as, quote, "The greatest preacher I ever heard." Imagine that. Martin Luther King Jr. himself had a favorite preacher.

Reverend Vivian is a shining example of hope born of faith. Despite the indignities he saw and experienced, he wholeheartedly believed in the possibility of a better future. As he described nonviolent action, quote, "To all who accepted it, nonviolence offered new power. It pitted calm courage against frantic fear. It set the action of love against the reaction of hate." Reverend Vivian's faith encapsulates the faith of so many of his generation, a faith akin to those in the Book of Hebrews, whom some describe as members of the great hall of faith, testimonies of those who lived and died in the promise of a better future.

And so as you embark on this year, know that the weighty matters of life and death are most often revealed in seemingly mundane moments. We build a life of value day by day, decision by decision, effort by effort. Our time here, as the biblical scripture suggests, is but a vapor, here today, gone tomorrow. What magnanimous experience ought we to make of it all? You've already begun to answer that question with your journey here at Harvard. The next question is how best to do it? My parents provide some instruction. Know that your character matters first and foremost. Know that the work of community building is central to any worthy occupational pursuit. And know that any great vision of justice for any community is a long and steady process. And finally, when the road gets hard, draw on the resources of the ancestors. Let their stories of struggle and triumph be a guide to your own sense of hope and possibility. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

All who are able, please rise in body and spirit for prayer. Let us pray. Like Dean Frederick's mom, may we be a people of character. Like her father, may we have visions of hope and justice, may we be community builders and may we, oh, God, draw from the strength of our ancestors, going forth in this new year to make the world a better place. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

Now, let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples saying...

Rev. Jones and Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come heaven, 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. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

Now, let us sing hymn number 350... Sorry. Hymn number 39, Lord God of Morning and of Night.

Congregation:

(singing).

The Rev. Dr. Calvin Jones:

As we leave this place but never away from God's love. As we leave this gathering but never away from God's presence. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His confidence upon you and give you peace. Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.