

Sally Hammel: Welcome to morning prayers. Will you please stand as you're able to join in the responsive reading number 150 in the black Appleton Psalter. "Hallelujah, praise God in the Holy temple. Praise God in the firmament of power."

Congregation: "Praise God for every mighty act. Praise God's excellent greatness."

Sally Hammel: "Praise God with the blast of the ram's horn. Praise God with the lyre and harp."

Congregation: "Praise God with timbrel and dance. Praise God with strings and pipe."

Sally Hammel: "Praise God with resounding cymbals. Praise God with loud, clanging cymbals."

Congregation: "Let everything that has breath praise God. Hallelujah."

Choir: (Singing)

Margaret Rennix: The reading I'm going to share today is not scriptural, but it's had an enormous spiritual impact on me. It's from the 19th century British novel, *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot, which I read for the first time in college. Just to provide some context before I dive in. The main character of *Middlemarch* is a young woman named Dorothea. And in this passage, she's just married named Casaubon and is discovering that marriage isn't what she expected.

Margaret Rennix: "Not that this inward amazement of Dorothea's was anything very exceptional. Many souls in their young nudity are tumbled out among incongruities and left to find their feet among them, while their elders go about their business. Nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy, which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind. And perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence."

Margaret Rennix: I find this passage powerful for two reasons. First, it articulates that suffering is not unusual, that it's actually very common. We live in a society that tends to treat negative emotions as abhorrent and exceptional, whereas Eliot draws attention to the frequency of suffering and how ordinary it really is. The second reason I find this passage powerful is because it beautifully reminds us that the vast majority of suffering is silent. It doesn't announce itself, and we actually have a tendency to push it behind closed doors when it tries to. Eliot sees that suffering is so ubiquitous and so quiet that if we somehow perceived it all suddenly we would actually die by its power, by the roar that lies on the other side of silence.

Margaret Rennix: Confronting suffering is really important to me, though I haven't always been good at it and I'm not even sure that I am now. I've moved from studying literature to studying immigration about which I teach a class in Harvard's writing program. My shift to focusing on immigration came as my sister started working as a lawyer at the family detention center in Dilley, Texas. I began volunteering there giving legal advice to mothers seeking asylum in the United States. This involves 12-hour days in which you enter a visitation trailer filled with women and children and then call one woman and her often tiny child into a small, cold room and ask her to account the most horrific things that have ever happened to her in order to determine if she has a case for asylum.

Margaret Rennix: I'm often conscious as I listen to story after story of unthinkable atrocities and terrible suffering that I am in just one small, cold room, but I'm surrounded by smaller rooms that contain more women, more suffering and that even these women represent a small fraction of the suffering in Central America, which is but a small fraction of the suffering in this world. Dilley, Texas is in the middle of nowhere, and the detention center is designed so that no one can see the suffering that happens in it because there is new suffering created there every day. The scale is enormous, ineffable, and we would die from its power if we could comprehend it completely.

Margaret Rennix: It can be hard to function knowing how ubiquitous how silent suffering is, but this is why I love Middlemarch. The answer as much as we have one is in the book. In a later scene, Dorothea is trying to figure out how to help the doctor who has been accused of a crime she believes he didn't commit and when the community around her tries to dissuade her from helping him, she responds, "What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?" The doctor she tries to help ultimately rejects her offer. She can't fix his suffering. But the fact that she sees him and that she tries to help him without asserting her will over his gives him what he needs to go on.

Margaret Rennix: Not all suffering can be fixed, but there is great power in being seen and in trying. And you don't need to go to Texas to find suffering. It's here in Cambridge in the people around you quietly and sometimes not so quietly carrying their burdens. So, in the vein of Eliot, I challenge you today and every day to ask yourself, "What have I done today to make life less difficult for someone?"

Sally Hammel: Let us pray. In darkness and in light, in trouble and joy, help us, Heavenly Father, to trust your love, to serve your purpose, and to praise your name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Please join me in saying the Lord's Prayer, which is on the back of your order of worship.

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 forever and ever. Amen.

Sally Hammel: Please stand as you are able and enjoying and singing Shall We Gather at the River, hymn number 336.

Congregation: (Singing)

Sally Hammel : So it's Wednesday, and we have MemCafe downstairs in the Student Oasis. We invite you all to come join us for coffee and conversation. And with that, let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.