

Lara Glass:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Lara Glass:

Welcome to morning prayers. Please stand as you are able for a responsive reading in your black applicant psalter book. Psalter number 51, found on page 26. Have mercy upon me, O God, after thy great goodness according to the multitude of thy mercies, do away mine offenses.

Congregation:

Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.

Lara Glass:

For I acknowledge my faults and my sin is ever before me.

Congregation:

Against thee only have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified in thy saying and clear when thou shalt judge.

Lara Glass:

Thou shalt purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Thou shalt wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Congregation:

Thou shalt make me hear joy and gladness that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

Lara Glass:

Turn thy face from my sins and put out all my misdeeds.

Congregation:

Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Lara Glass:

Cast me not away from thy presence and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.

Congregation:

O give me the comfort of thy help again and establish me with thy free spirit.

Lara Glass:

You may be seated.

Choir:
(singing)

Tripp Rebrovick:
Good morning.

Congregation:
Good morning.

Tripp Rebrovick:

I'll start with the short quotation from Hannah Arendt. The Polis, properly speaking is the organization of the people as it arises out of speaking and acting together and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to meet. Wherever you go, you will be in Polis. This weekend at the invitation of the Harvard Bay Council, approximately 5,000 high school students will come to Cambridge to participate in our 46th Annual National Forensics Tournament. While this great mass of debaters will inevitably cause headaches, I want to spend some time here to justify them or celebrate an activity that has such potential, but that often escapes public notice. In fact, we still call our event a forensics tournament, although most people now associate the word forensics with the television show CSI. But forensic actually means that which is public. Crime scene investigators do practice forensic science or science that serves the public's interest in justice, but we proudly refuse to change the name of our event because we firmly believe that our tournament and the activity of speech and debate remain paramount forensic activities. They serve the public's interest.

Tripp Rebrovick:

Professor Jill Lepore recently wrote an essay about a New Deal program funded by the federal government to sponsor and host public debates for adults all around the country. From 1933 to 1938, public debates were held during the evenings in high school auditoria. Ultimately, the program came to include two and a half million Americans and while it is only speculation on my part, I believe that those millions did something quite significant and profound. After the war, federal support for debating resumed but in a far more circumscribed fashion. Specifically in 1947, the army at West Point created the National Debate Tournament subsidizing the event until being forced to cut funding during the Vietnam War. The Army's decisions led to a growth in college debate programs around the country and just as importantly nationalized the highly regional debate circuit of the time.

Tripp Rebrovick:

Today it would be naive of me to ignore the concerns of some of my colleagues that debate might be dying out in America. There is no longer any government support whatsoever for debate and fewer colleges are willing to fund teams that compete at the NDT. And while many other valuable forms of debate are practiced in universities, none focus, as this tournament does, on the policies that should be enacted to solve particular problems. That said, debate in high schools remains robust, albeit only in select schools. Our tournament remains as large as ever, even as the opportunities for debate in college decline.

Tripp Rebrovick:

What are we to make of this disconnect? Debate among teenagers is thriving, but among adults it is nearly nonexistent. What masquerades on cable news or in legislative chambers can not truly be called debate, which requires direct refutation and defined positions for each side. Is this decline related to the decline of democratic institutions in the United States, as Lepore suggests? I do wonder if both phenomenon can be explained by the same cause.

Tripp Rebrovick:

The former president of Amherst and of Brown, Alexander Meiklejohn, offered this famous reflection on college debating in the United States. "It seems to me," Meiklejohn noted, "that stronger than any other group, tougher in intellectual fiber, keener in intellectual interest, and better equipped to battle with coming problems are the college debaters. Those who apart from their regular studies ban themselves together for intellectual controversy with each other and with their friends in other colleges. When students eagerly formed their clubs for spontaneous, enthusiastic pursuit of some chosen ideal, they gain from it a power, a liveliness of interest, which can never be gained where that spontaneity is lacking."

Tripp Rebrovick:

I think that what Meiklejohn noticed about intercollegiate debate can be said about democratic societies at large and might help explain the emergence of public debates in the 1930s. Citizens, like undergraduates, gain a power, a liveliness of interest when they formed their clubs for spontaneous, enthusiastic pursuit of some chosen ideal, in this case self-government. Now, it is admittedly a self-interested proposition, but I do believe that high school and college debate teams remain fundamental to the exercise of self-government we continue to undertake. What makes debate unique is that students voluntarily submit their ideas to others, inviting the reputation of another team and the evaluation of a judge. If they lose, they refine their arguments and try again. Many of my colleagues justify debate as a forum for training future policy makers, but in my view, this too heavily discounts the present. I think public debating actively cultivates necessary habits and attitudes now.

Tripp Rebrovick:

One must submit one's ideas to the questioning, reputation, judgment, and evaluation of peers. That process is emotionally draining, but ultimately the heart of democracy. When I despair at the events we witness daily, I think about the thousands of students who spend their weekends practicing the harder debate. But still I ask, what about the adults? All of the parents who forced their children to participate in this activity, where are they supposed to debate? And as Arendt phrased it, "constitute the Polis." It took Lepore's essay to pinpoint to me what is in hindsight obvious, without systematic debating, enthusiastically pursued by its citizens of all ages, how could a democratic self-government survive? Thank you.

Lara Glass:

Please join me in offering the Lord's prayer printed on the reverse of your order of worship. 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. 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.

Lara Glass:

Please stand as you are able to sing hymn number 208 in your crimson memorial church hymnal. Eternal Light Shine in my Heart. Number 208.

Congregation/choir
(singing)

Lara Glass:

In the words of John O'Donohue, may we live this day, compassionate of heart, clear in word, gracious in awareness, courageous in thought, and generous in love. Amen.

Congregation:
Amen.