

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Good morning. Welcome to Morning Prayers at the Memorial Church. And welcome to the Spring term here at Harvard. We are glad to have you, and to have you back. Please join in our responsorial Psalm, this morning. I'd invite you please to rise and make the responses in bold. Our Psalm is 118. Number 1-1-8.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Praise the Lord for he is good. His steadfast love is eternal.

Congregation:

Let Israel declare, his steadfast love is eternal.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let the house of Aaron declare, his steadfast love is eternal.

Congregation:

Let those who fear the Lord declare, his steadfast love is eternal.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

In distress, I called on the Lord. The Lord answered me and brought me relief.

Congregation:

The Lord is by my side. I will not fear. What can man do to me?

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Open the gates of victory for me, that I may enter them and praise the Lord.

Congregation:

This is the gate of the Lord. The victorious shall enter through it.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

I praise you, for you have answered me and have become my deliverance.

Congregation:

The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

This is the Lord's doing. It is marvelous in our sight.

Congregation:

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us exalt and rejoice in it.

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

This is a reading from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, beginning at the 46th verse.

Then Jesus came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had changed the water into wine. Now, there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged Jesus to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe." The official said to him, "Sir, come down before my little boy dies." Jesus said to him, "Go, your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.

As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. And he asked them the hour when he began to recover. And they said to him, "Yesterday, at 1:00 in the afternoon, the fever left him." The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he himself believed, along with his whole household. Now, this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

Here endeth the lesson.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

It is good to have you back here in the sanctuary after we've been away from it for a bit, not just because of the break in term, but also because of the latest surge of the pandemic. But it's good to have you at the beginning of the Spring term, on this beautiful winter day. And I'm going to resume my habit of speaking to you about saints from my tradition. Today is the Feast Day of Florence Li Tim-Oi, who was the first woman ordained a priest in my churches, in the Anglican Communion, the first woman ordained a priest. But the circumstances of her ordination are complicated.

Li Tim-Oi was born in 1907 in Hong Kong. In 1931, she was present at the Cathedral for the ordination of a woman to the diaconate as a deacon. This was allowed at the time. And she was inspired by that to go study theology in Mainline China. She returned to Hong Kong in 1938, where she worked in (Santo António) with refugees of the Sino-Japanese war. She was ordained to deacon in Hong Kong and then sent by her Bishop, a man named Richard Hall, to Macau to do work in Macau. This is the late '30s, early 1940s. Japan occupied Hong Kong. And there were no priests in Macau. And the Bishop could not get a priest to Macau. And so, he gave Florence permission to administer the sacraments, to celebrate communion. In my tradition, that's not a thing that deacons can do. It's also not a thing that women at the time could do.

Hall wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury and said, "I don't believe in women priests, but if I could get to her, I would ordain her, because I'm determined that no prejudices should prevent congregations committed to my care from having the sacraments of the Church."

In 1944, they were able to meet. They met at a small town, kind of secretly, and he ordained her. And she continued her work as a priest. And then the war ended, and there was a furor over this ordination.

lots of folks, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, railed at the irregularity of it. That was the language that they used. And she renounced her license to practice. She never renounced her ordination, but she renounced her license to practice.

In 1958, after the Revolution, churches in China closed. She was forced to undergo political reeducation. She was abused. She had to cut up all her investments. She would retreat in the mountains to pray in secret. Eventually, she moved to Canada. In the '70s, women became ordained in various churches in the Anglican Communion, and she started working as a priest at the end of her life, in Toronto.

Florence Li's story is obviously a complicated story, a story complicated by gender and racism and colonialism and violence. It's one that implicates me personally in lots of ways, not just because I am a priest in a very hierarchical church that only lets priests do certain things, not just because I'm a man in that church, also because I'm a Japanese person. And she was the victim of really complicated movements of colonialism in East Asia.

But what I find interesting about her story is that the man who ordained her, Richard Hall, did so even though he opposed the ordination of women, because he said necessity demanded it. The people needed a minister and she was their minister. The truth is, there is no ministry without necessity. There is no ministry without need. There's a famous Christian writer named Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian, who has this famous line about vocation in which he says, "Vocation is where your greatest gift meets the world's greatest need." That's a lovely way to put it.

When I talked to my Bishop about becoming a priest, he said, "You might want to be a priest, but we need to figure out if the church needs a priest like you." He gave the example of a desert island. He said, "If you went to you were on a desert island and you really loved to cook, and you felt like it was your life's location to cook, but you're trained as a surgeon, and there are three other cooks on the island, we might need you to be a doctor, whatever you feel on the inside."

One of the characteristics of our Protestant tradition, my denomination's Protestant tradition, this church's Protestant tradition, is this basic pre-supposition that we are all priests, in fact, that there is a priesthood of all believers, that we are all ministers. And if ministry is based in need, then what that means is that this is another way of saying that the world needs you.

I think these are words with which to begin this Spring term at Harvard, when the needs of the world clamor all around us and crowd around us, shouting their demands, to remind ourselves that we are ministers, which again is another way of saying, the world needs you. Whether you are young or old, rich or poor, strong or weak, smart or not so smart, holy or not so holy, full of faith or not really sure about any of this, the world needs you.

The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And with you.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us pray.

Almighty God, who pours out your Spirit upon your children, grant that we, following the example of your servant, Florence Li Tim-Oi, who was chosen priest in your Church, may with faithfulness, patience, and tenacity, proclaim your love and goodness to all people through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives in reigns with you, and the Holy Spirit, one God in glory, everlasting. Amen.

And now let us pray together the words Jesus taught us 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 evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Please rise and join in singing our concluding hymn, Number 36.

Congregation:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us bless-