

Anna Burnham:

Good morning. And welcome to Morning Prayers at Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton Psalter Book, Psalm 153, found on page 78. Please remain masked and stand as you are able to read responsively by the whole verse.

Anna Burnham:

Oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all day long.

Congregation:

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it's always with me.

Anna Burnham:

I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation.

Congregation:

I understand me than the aged, for I obey your precepts.

Anna Burnham:

I hold back my feet from every evil way in order to keep your word.

Congregation:

I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught them.

Anna Burnham:

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.

Congregation:

Through your precepts, I get understanding; therefore I hate [inaudible 00:04:05].

Choir:

(singing).

Dwight Fee:

At the end of his essay, Friendship, Emerson writes, "It has seemed to me lately more possible than I knew to carry a friendship greatly on one side, without due correspondence on the other. Why should I encumber myself with the regrets that the receiver is not as capacious? It never troubles the sun that some of his rays fall wide in vain into ungrateful space and only a small part on the reflecting planet. Let your greatness educate the crude and cold companion. If he is unequal, he will presently pass away. But thou art enlarged by thine own shining. It is thought a disgrace to love unrequited, but the great will see that true love cannot be unrequited. True love transcends the unworthy object and dwells and broods on the eternal."

I've recently been thinking a lot about Emerson's essay, both in terms of my work and family, especially my father. First as a Resident Dean for first year students, I'm very aware about how our students are thinking a lot about their friendships right now, as they choose their block mates in anticipation of moving to the houses to spend the rest of their time at the college. Some students ask, "Why do others seem to have more friends than I do? Why aren't my roommates asking me to block with them? What is all this saying about me?" These worries are completely understandable, I would say, given friendship's vital importance for mental and even physical wellbeing. And I know how friends can literally change our lives. But Emerson warns us. We shouldn't cave in to personal insecurities about making friends and about needing them to like us. That sets us up for failure, or at least friendships that reflect rash and foolish alliances, as he puts it.

The approach should be the opposite. He writes that "the condition which high friendship demands is the ability to do without it." It makes sense for someone who champions self-reliance to suggest that, if you invest in your own uniqueness and pathway in life, friends, and the right friends, will come to you. "My friends have come to me unsought. The great God gave them to me," Emerson writes.

It also follows that he would say, famously, "The only way to have a friend is to be one." True to Emerson, his essay is winding and it can feel contradictory. Reading it more than once, you can feel the ambivalence. He celebrates the friend as a masterpiece of nature, and describes friendship as the solidest thing we know, and even writes, "A new person is to me a great event, and hinders me from sleep." And yet elsewhere, he's quite skeptical that we can ever connect on a higher plane of friendship, unless we can firstly cultivate a sense of solitude in ourselves and embrace the unsettled cycles and seasons of even our solidest friendships.

But there's a more obvious resolution to all this. And I think you have a sense of it from the reading. To put it very simply, Emerson seems to be saying that we aren't going to connect with everyone. Someone won't reciprocate, and others will just not be very good friends, at all. It might be best just to drop all of that. What matters is that we keep projecting our rays into ungrateful space.

It's something like karma, I suppose, but not entirely in the way we often use that term. As we are talking here about leaving the needs of the self or ego completely behind. Living through an ethic or philosophy of friendship means to hold something larger that exists within our everyday lives and relationships. What is this? To be honest, it's hard for me to articulate this part, what we're holding, still reflecting on it. So I'll quote Emerson. "There can never be deep peace between two spirits, never mutual with respect, until in their dialogue, each stands for the whole world."

And it's here that I think of my 88-year-old father. When he got older, he didn't really work on his friendships very much, and I wonder what these last 10 years or so would've been like had he maintained those previous friendships? Would he have had a better life during that time? Would he be happier now.

Then I think about how he lived his life, capaciously, to use Emerson's word, with such unyielding kindness and generosity to everyone, and with such caring and love for the natural world and for animals. Think St. Francis with a strong Buddhist bent, never a social butterfly, but rather someone who

inspires trust and tenderness. Though surrounded by loving family, my dad now lives mostly in solitude. It puts into relief all the ways that his life of friendship, love, and authenticity has reverberated back into the life and souls of so many. I find so much pride and happiness in knowing, well maybe not knowing, how far-reaching his rays have traveled, and what this has meant to others and to this life.

For me, none of this is about placing anyone up on a higher ethical dimension when it comes to embracing friendship. That would miss the point. There was so much more about how all of us have the capacity to embody friendship, not only as a relationship, but as a way of life. Perhaps it's about carrying with us a very simple truth found in the very first line of Emerson's essay. "We have a great deal more kindness than has ever spoken."

Anna Burnham:

Please stand, and let us pray.

Anna Burnham:

God, you give us the gift of friendship to brighten the joys and soften the sorrows of this life. Help us to feel that friendship in all its forms and iterations through its seasons in ourselves and in others. May we be rays beaming with your light. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

And together, let us recite the prayer that 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.

Anna Burnham:

Together, let us sing the hymn, Let Us with a Gladsome Mind, verses 1, 2, and 3. Number 8 found in your Crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Congregation:

(singing)

Anna Burnham:

Go forth into the world in peace. May the love of God draw us closer to God and to each other, today and every day. And together, let us say, Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.