

Laurie Sedgwick:

Good morning and welcome to morning prayers. Please stand as you are able for our responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter. This morning we'll be reading Psalm number 4, found on page two.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Answer me when I call, oh God, of my right. You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.

Congregation:

How long, people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love feigned words and seek after loss?

Laurie Sedgwick:

But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for Himself. The Lord hears when I call Him.

Congregation:

When you are disturbed, do not sin. Ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Offer right sacrifices and put your trust in the Lord.

Congregation:

There are many who say Oh, that you might see some good. Let the light of your face shine on us, of Lord.

Laurie Sedgwick:

You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and wine abound.

Congregation:

I will both lie down to sleep in peace for you alone, Oh, Lord, make me lie down in safety.

Choir:

(singing)

Kristen Maples:

Good morning, everybody. My name's Kristen and I'm a master's student at Harvard Divinity School. As a student at the Divinity School, I'm exposed to a variety of theologies, faith traditions, spiritual practices, and other theological concepts on a daily basis, yet I have no practice or tradition of my own.

Today I've come to speak to you about death. Death is a heavy topic that is hard for me to understand, yet I find myself thinking about it constantly, about what role it plays in every new context I learn about in my classes, as well as in everyday life. In a way, death is what has brought me here. I came to divinity

school with the hopes of providing end of life spiritual care to the dying. I will share a brief story of what made me feel called to this line of work.

I spent a number of years working as a receptionist or registrar in an emergency room. One day as I arrived, the physician on staff that evening approached me and informed a child who passed away and he was going to inform the family once I was settled in my position at the front desk in the waiting room. I was to be responsible for the front-facing interactions with the family and limit visitors to the child's room to two people at a time.

After I sat at the desk, I informed the physician that I was ready. He came out to speak privately to the immediate family, and I noticed there were at least 30 other people waiting news of the child's condition in the waiting area. After the physician informed the family, I could see the news spread through the crowd in the waiting room like a wave. People fell onto their knees, some collapsed into chairs, many screamed aloud to God in anguish. However, certain peacefulness my body and it almost felt right that I was there to interact with these people and form this function in their lives. I would later describe this experience almost as a mystical one. Perhaps that feeling of love and calm and duty that overcame my body was the first and only manifestation of God in my life.

There are other stories like this in my life that made me feel called to serve others spiritually as a hospital chaplain. Many of these stories involved death or grief in some way so I would like to find a way to specialize in end of life care. Death is interesting to me for many reasons. It is an experience that unites all of humankind. Death is a process. It creeps, it follows us, it is mysterious and elusive, yet ever present. Death has been represented in movies, art, and popular culture in myriad ways, even personified into the specter known in English as the Reaper that exists in various forms across many cultures.

As we are surrounded by a mass casualty event here known as the COVID-19 pandemic my interest has only grown in death. Now more than ever end of life spiritual care is of the utmost importance. So too is a place for the living to discuss that. As a culture, we are fascinated by death yet have few avenues with which to discuss it.

Students at the divinity school are doing something about this, and we are making a difference in each others' lives as well as the greater community by creating these spaces to have these conversations. Talking about death with each other can help us understand its mystery and its beauty. Talking about death can help us process loss and understand grief.

What is grief anyway? Is it a process? A goal? When does it begin? Does grief end? Should it end? How can we understand the pervasive absence in our lives of someone who has died? These are just a few of the questions that I encourage you to ask each other. To quote Reverend Matthew Potts, "No one wants to talk about death, but everyone wants to talk about death." I invite you to do so. You just might be surprised about what beautiful experiences you can have and the new ways of building relationships when we have these conversations with each other.

The spiritual care surrounding death interests me because it is complex. Death is not just a physical process. It involves legal, financial, emotional, and spiritual concerns. I've also observed that if a person is dying, they have different spiritual needs than the individuals around them that love them. My interest in death is not just for the dead and dying, but those they leave behind, they need care too.

And as I continue to attempt to understand death, I have come to see that is not just the end of life, it can also mark a beginning. The word death has been used to describe transformations and transformative experiences. For example, I've heard people describe sobriety as the death of the suffering self of the alcoholic and the beginning of a new life created in what is thereafter alcoholic recovery. I see the beauty of death every year as the seasons change. Winter brings with it the falling of leaves, the deaths of plants, bitter cold, and shorter days. However, winter always comes with it the promise of spring, of new life literally springing forth from the earth from even the most impossible places, of leaves bursting from the trees, the calls of birds returning from their long journeys from other places.

I do not claim to know what happens when we die or after we die, but what I can do and what I want to do is help prepare people for that journey. Not only those going on the journey, but those staying behind.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Thank you. Please stand as you are able and let us pray.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Oh, gracious, gentle spirit of love, your energy permeates the universe, igniting earth with your goodness, truth, and beauty. Open our minds and hearts to a deeper awareness of our interconnectedness with you, each other, and all creation. May we experience your unique presence within the sacred web of creation. This in Jesus name, we pray, amen.

Laurie Sedgwick:

And now let us together 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 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, the power, and the glory forever and ever, amen. Let us sing the hymn, "Now Thank Thee All Our God," number five, found in your crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Congregation:

(singing)

Laurie Sedgwick:

Let us go forth into the world in peace and dedicated to your service, oh, Lord. Let us hold fast to that which is good. Render no man evil for evil, strengthen the faint hearted, support the weak, help the needy and the afflicted, honor all beings. Let us love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of his spirit, and may God's blessing be upon us and remain with us always, amen.

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