

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 33, found on page 17. Please remain masked and stand as you are able, to read responsibly by the whole verse.

Anna Burnham:

Sing forth, oh, you righteous, to the Lord. It is fit that the upright acclaim him.

Congregation:

Praise the Lord with lyre; with the ten-stringed harp sing to him.

Anna Burnham:

Sing him a new song, place sweetly with shouts of joy.

Congregation:

For the word of the Lord is right; his every deed is faithful.

Anna Burnham:

He loves what is right and just. The earth is full of the Lord's faithful care.

Congregation:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made by the breath of his mouth, all their host.

Anna Burnham:

He heaps up the ocean waters like a mound, stores the deep in vaults.

Congregation:

Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world dread him.

Anna Burnham:

For he spoke and it was. He commanded and it endured.

Congregation:

The Lord frustrates the plans of the nations, brings to naught the designs of the peoples.

Anna Burnham:

What the Lord plans, endures forever. What he designs for ages on end.

Choir:

(singing)

Anna Burnham:

The following is an excerpt of a letter from Dorothy Day, to Catholic peace activist, Gordon Zahn, written in 1968. As a convert, I never expected much from the bishops. In all history, popes and bishops and father Abbots, seem to have been blind and power loving and greedy. I never expected leadership from them. It is the saints that keep appearing all through history who keep things going. What I do expect is the bread of life. And down through the ages, there is that continuity. The gospel is hard. Loving your enemies and the worst are of our own household, is hard. If I had a dollar for every person who, after meeting me, getting to know me, learning a bit about my politics and beliefs, et cetera, was surprised to learn that, not only am I Catholic, but that I continue to actively name myself as such. I'd be, perhaps, not rich, but I'd have at least quite a few dollars.

I recently had a student ask me, how do I stay in religious spaces that don't always align with my feminist values or that not only don't affirm, but that actively reject and malign my identity as a queer person. My beliefs on reproductive justice. A faith in which I am not allowed to be ordained, merely because I am a woman, even though I have felt some level of pull to the vocation throughout my life. My answer was and is to the many who ask this question, that stay is a complex word with many different meanings and textures. And that being Catholic has taught me everything I know about holy descent and carving out sacred space and claiming it as your own. Just as I was thinking about this last week, this letter from Dorothy Day found me. If you are not familiar with Dorothy, I implore you to become so. She was the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. A lifelong advocate for the poor, an anarchist and a pacifist.

She was also a deeply devout Catholic, who converted as an adult. Her case for canonization as a saint, just left the Archdiocese of New York and has been sent to Rome for next steps. And as you can see in this letter, she was often unimpressed by those she saw leading the church that was so beloved to her. The Catholic church is famously hierarchical. The Pope and Rome is the leader of the faith. And under him a complex network of men, from Cardinals to bishops to local priests run the church. Unlike Dorothy, I am not a convert. I am, what we call, a cradle Catholic, born into this faith. And yet I too have never expected much from clergy. I think I encountered far too many mediocre sermons in my 16 years of Catholic schooling. I have experienced and seen too much harm around gender, bodies and sexuality, caused by some of the churches twisted theologies.

I was only nine when the clerical sexual abuse crisis broke and I have come of age in its wake. But Catholicism continues to claim me and matter to me deeply. And so while Dorothy was loyal to the church in a way I don't think I ever can be. I still find inspiration in the way she was always pushing back from within. The way she once wrote to the Archdiocese of New York and said, "Actually, no, we're not going to take the word Catholic out of the title of the Catholic Worker, because we see our politics as fully aligned with the gospel message. But thank you so much for the suggestion." A New York Times

review of a biography of Dorothy asks, "Was Dorothy Day a saint or subversive?" The answer to me is not only, obviously, both, but that she is a saint in part, because she was subversive.

She challenged the church to be better. To remember its mission and its commitment to the poor and marginalized, that were there at its founding, nearly 2000 years before she lived. And she was hardly the first to be skeptical of the missions of the fallible men running the show and how their goings on so often run counter to God's will. In the 12th century, Catherine of Sienna, in a fit of frustration, sick of constantly having to write popes and tell them how to be better leaders, threatened in one letter to Pope Gregory the 11th, quote, "Don't make it necessary for me to complain about you to Christ crucified." Literally, don't make me take these complaints to management. What makes this dissent holy then? How is it sacred? Less. To me dissent and critique says that you care about something and that it matters that it be better. It says you are important to me for reasons that are complicated, yes, but that are real.

And I need you to be better. Here's how. And to name something as worthwhile, important. Is that not to claim it as sacred? Doesn't that make critique of it sacred as well? The church for me is not Rome's latest statement or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and their shameful politics. It is the bread of life down through the ages, as Dorothy says. It is the history of it all. The beauty. It is the chants, the sounds, the structure of a monastic day, prayer, art, music, the saints, sacramental theology. The idea that God reveals God's self to us in the tangible things of this world. It is the idea of a religion that started around tables over meal times, that still holds that sacred communion at the heart of its ritual. It is the veneration of Mary. The way rosary beads feel passing through my fingers. The idea of centuries of my Irish ancestors, practicing the same faith, bringing it with them when they cross the ocean.

As Dorothy says, "It is the saints that keep appearing all through history." And she means, what we call, small S saints here, not just the named and formally canonized ones, but the everyday saints that we are all called to be. It is the people and their witness who make the church, who co-create the faith every day. And to me, that is worth being loud for, that is worth claiming my Catholic identity, boldly, publicly and saying, "Hey, listen up. This is my church too." Please pray with me. God of misfits. You give us the gift of righteous anger and holy dissent and the gifts of thought, emotion and the words to express it all. Our human projects are imperfect because they are human. Help us to be bold. To hold each other accountable. To make these things better. To better serve each other. And thus, you. Amen. Please stand as you are able, 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. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen. Together, let us sing the hymn, Mourning glory, some sky, versus one and two, number 345, 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.