

Laurie Sedgwick:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Laurie Sedgwick:

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 4 found on page two. "Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer."

Congregation:

"How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?"

Laurie Sedgwick:

"But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself. The Lord hears when I call to 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, 'O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!'"

Laurie Sedgwick:

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

Congregation:

"I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

Congregation:

(singing).

Nicholas Opiyo:

Very good morning to everyone. My name is Nicholas Opiyo. I'm a Ugandan human rights lawyer and a Scholar at Risk Fellow of the Harvard Kennedy Schools Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. When I was asked to speak today and share a reading with you, I thought long and hard about it. I nearly declined the opportunity. But when I was told that I could share anything, even a joke, I felt comfortable.

You see, as a lawyer, I'm more comfortable in a courthouse than I am on a church podium. For my entire life so far, this is only the second opportunity to speak from a church podium. The first time was at St. John's Episcopal Church in Oakland, California. I still recall the day. It was then as is now a very humbling experience. Because as a human rights lawyer, I spend my day in a courthouse before a judge, before policemen in a police station, or before a government official, oftentimes, making a very strong argument about the respect for human right rights and freedoms.

These encounters, as you can imagine, are often unpleasant, they're argumentative, especially in a country like Uganda, where the respect for human rights and democratic values continue to decline every day. This work comes at a personal cost, especially because of the issues that we work on, like defending the country's LGBTI community.

But today, I'd like to reflect with you not about the difficulties of my work in Uganda, but on a small concept of neighbor, a concept that I have reflected on little more since I came here in August. What does it mean to be a neighbor? Who is a neighbor? Why is the concept important to us and why should we care?

Before I offer you my reading and reflections on the word neighbor, let me tell you a little story. As a child, I was born and raised in a war zone. I lived for nearly two decades in an epicenter of a conflict between the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army, a brutal rebel group renowned for its abduction of children into sex slavery, and for turning young boys into killers.

I was a night commuter, a term that was used to describe children [inaudible 00:10:01] to sleep in open public spaces in the town center to avoid being abducted by rebel forces. But through a mixture of luck, divine intervention and the generosity of many other people, I made it to law school, against all odds.

I consider myself a lawyer and being a lawyer is a privilege to me. It is an honor that I have used to defend the rights of sexual minorities, human rights defenders, and all vulnerable people in my country. I have dedicated my life's work to using the law to defend these freedoms. And yet, here I am as a Scholar at Risk at Harvard, because my life was in danger.

In December of 2020, I was in prison on trumped-up charges by the Ugandan authorities. Chapter Four Uganda, the organization we lead, the human rights charity that I founded and led was closed by the authorities. After nine months of agony, the case against me was dropped without prosecution. And in August, I had to leave Uganda to come to Harvard as a Scholar at Risk for fear of being rearrested and being subjected to torture by the authorities.

Harvard is a very intellectually stimulating environment and many would want to be here. Many could count themselves lucky to have made it here. But for me, the past six months have been the most difficult of my life, as I've had to live away from my parents, my father, who is 94. My mother, who is almost 80, and my six-year-old daughter, who I cannot put to bed.

Nicholas Opiyo:

But here I have found a family of very kind people like Diane [inaudible 00:12:02], my landlady, who on the first day of my tenancy welcomed me with a flower and a bottle of wine. In her words, "Enjoy your new home." Or Sushma Raman, [inaudible 00:12:17] at the Carr Center, who enveloped me in love and care and made the past six months bearable, even when the weather conspired to be bad, I find warmth in the community here at Harvard. I find neighbors. I find people who care. For me, they have become the closest family I have had in the last six months.

At law school, we are taught that neighbor is a principle, an abstract term, a concept that requires one to take reasonable steps to avoid acts or omission that can reasonably be foreseen, as likely to cause injury. But this conception of neighbor is abstract and perhaps unhelpful. In other words, it's a forbearance, a patient self-control, a restraint, a tolerance measured in direct response to, and in consequence over [inaudible 00:13:20] actions or inactions.

I found myself reflecting more on the words of Jesus to find meaning in the word neighbor. And let me share with you a text from the book of Luke 10:25-37, you're all familiar with the story. And Jesus talked about the stranger, and let me quote.

"On the occasion, an expert in law," a lawyer, I presume, in this case, "stood up to test Jesus," as only a lawyer would, "'Teacher,' he asked, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the law?' He replied, 'How do you read it?' He answered, 'Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind, love your neighbor as you love thyself.' 'You've answered correctly.' Jesus replied, 'Do this and you will live.'"

"But he wanted to justify himself. So, he asked Jesus, 'Father,'" again, only as a lawyer would, "'Who is a neighbor?'" Jesus replied with a long story of three people, a priest, a Levite and a Good Samaritan, who encountered a Levite who was injured. The first two walk past, the stranger offer help.

For me, in this text, I found a deeper meaning of neighbor far beyond the legal conception of the town. I found in it an inspiration and, in fact, with the benefit of hindsight, a vindication of our work in defending human rights. For me, neighbor is love, neighbor is mercy, neighbor is compassion, neighbor is ubuntu, a concept of an open heart and home in the African community.

It is our moral duty and obligation to stand up against injustice, to fight for the vulnerable and the underserved, even when it is inconvenient to do so. In so doing, we give meaning and life to the concept that Jesus taught us in Luke 10.

In closing, let me leave you with the words of Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who was the last speaker before Martin Luther King Jr. took to the stage in 1963, in what is now called the famous Washington Speech.

The rabbi said in a court, "Neighbor is not a geographical term. It's a moral concept. It means our collective responsibility for the preservation of man's dignity and integrity." Let us pray. Almighty Father, we come before you believing in your mercy, believing in your grace. We come before you at a time when the world is experiencing war, diseases, hunger, trouble. We beseech you, almighty Father, to

offer us your blessings, to bless the people of Ukraine, the people in Afghanistan, and all people around the world who are facing sufferings, offer them comfort, knowing that, in humanity, they have neighbors far and near. And that these neighbors will come together to stand in solidarity with them, to pray for them, so they may find peace. We pray all this in Jesus' name.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Please, stand as you are able, and let us pray the prayer that Jesus taught us saying, Our Father.

Congregation:

Our Father.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Who art in heaven.

Congregation:

Who art in heaven.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Hallowed be thy name.

Congregation:

Hallowed by thy name.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Thy kingdom come.

Congregation:

Thy kingdom come.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Thy will be done-

Congregation:

Thy will be done-

Laurie Sedgwick:

... on earth as it is in heaven.

Congregation:

... on earth as it is in heaven.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Give us this day our daily bread.

Congregation:

Give us this day our daily bread.

Laurie Sedgwick:

And forgive us our trespasses-

Congregation:

And forgive us our trespasses-

Laurie Sedgwick:

... as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Congregation:

... as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Laurie Sedgwick:

And lead us not into temptation.

Congregation:

And lead us not into temptation.

Laurie Sedgwick:

But deliver us from evil.

Congregation:

But deliver us from evil.

Laurie Sedgwick:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.

Congregation:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Let us sing the hymn Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, number 285, found in your crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Congregation:

(singing).

Laurie Sedgwick:

May the spirit and light of this morning and the special spirit and light of this church and community bless us all, watch over us and protect us on our journey, and open us from the darkness into the light of peace, light of nature and all good spirits and angels and our friends among the dead, bless us and heal us. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.