

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Welcome to morning prayers here in the Appleton Chapel of the Memorial Church. Our responsorial Psalm this morning is number 41 in your black psalter. Please rise and make the responses in bold. Blessed is he that considerateth the poor, the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble.

Congregation:

The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive. And he shall be blessed upon the earth. And thou will not deliver him unto the will of his enemies.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

All that hate me whisper together against me. Against me, do they devise my hurt.

Congregation:

An evil disease, say they, cleaveth fast unto him: and now that he lieth he shall rise up no more.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.

Congregation:

But thou, O Lord, be merciful unto me, and raise me up, that I may requite them.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

By this I know that thou favourest me, because mine enemy doth not triumph over me.

Congregation:

And as for me, thou upholdest me in mine integrity, and settest me before thy face for ever.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, from everlasting and to everlasting. Amen and amen.

Chior:

(music).

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

This is a reading from the 14th chapter of the gospel of St. John beginning at the 23rd verse. Jesus said, "Those who love me will keep my word. And my Father will love them. And we will come to them and

make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine, but it's from the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while I am still with you, but the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you." He ended the lesson.

Today is the feast day of Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century theologian and bishop from Turkey. He's known as one of the Cappadocian Fathers. I'll just say a bit more about them in a minute. They were incredibly influential theologians in the fourth century. Gregory's meant to have died... We're not really sure, but he's meant to have died on March 9th in the year 395. And so this is what we call his heavenly birthday, and the day we remember him.

I mentioned these Cappadocian Fathers. His brother Basil was another one of them, another friend named Gregory, Gregory of Nazianzus, were the other two. These three theologians together helped establish what today we in the Christian churches across the world regard as orthodoxy. Or more specifically, Trinitarian Orthodoxy. These three guys are the ones who developed and solidified our language about the Trinity, which is solidified into a bunch of confusion and paradox. I could say more about what the Trinity means, but not this morning because we only have a few minutes. How's that for a dodge?

I said he has established orthodoxy, but a lot of what is most interesting about him did not become orthodoxy. This Trinitarian thing was very important to him and that was established, but, for example, Gregory believed in universal salvation. He believed there was no hell and that all would come into relationship in the favor of God at some point.

Gregory was born into an aristocratic family in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. He had eight siblings, four of them also became saints. So his parents were bating over 500 with saints among the children. I feel like they should write a parenting book for all of us who are struggling with it now.

He was made a bishop in a small town called Nyssa, which we don't even know where that was anymore. He didn't get along with his archbishop. He was accused of improprieties and deposed. When a new emperor was made, he was restored to this bishop [inaudible 00:09:47].

He was constantly in arguments and I speak about orthodoxy, but at the time everyone was arguing with everyone else all the time. The reason he was deposed is because he ordained folks who had his ideas of the Trinity and his archbishop disagreed. And then when he became bishop, he got into arguments with his own priests who held different positions. There was not one idea of what it meant to be Christian then, just like there isn't now. And they were arguing as much then as we are now.

Gregory is one of my favorites. I'm glad his feast day fell on a Wednesday this year. Two reasons. The first is that Gregory gives the only sustained critique of slavery in the ancient Western world. Slavery was taken for granted in New Testament and for centuries afterwards in Greek culture. Gregory alone, among all these theologians, wrote against slavery. He said, "If the human is in the likeness of God, who is the human's buyer? Tell me, who is his seller?" And then he says, quite remarkably, "To God alone

belongs this power, but not even to God, not even God has the power to make a slave of the human because God has created humans as free, so much so that even when we were bound to sin, become slave to sin, God freed us from that burden. God does not enslave what is free," Gregory said. "And so the one who does enslave what is free sets his own power over God's, and who would do that?"

It would be 1500 years before another Christian spoke out against slavery. Think about that. One Christian in almost 2000 years. That alone, I think, is a reason to pay attention to Gregory. If he was wise in this, he was probably wise in other things.

The other thing that I find interesting about Gregory is that he preached the infinity of God. This was not taken for granted at his time. One of the earliest theologians, a man named Origen, did not believe that God was infinite, but Gregory made this argument that God was infinite. And he said the reason why he believed God is infinite is because God's goodness is infinite. And since God's goodness is essential, since God's goodness is part of God's very being, God also must be infinite.

I might put it in slightly different language. I would say that God's love is endless. God can always love you more. And since God is love, there is always more to God. God must be infinite.

This created a problem for Gregory, because we are not infinite. We're finite creatures. So, "What does it mean to be in relationship with this infinite God?" Gregory asked. He said, "What it means is to come to peace, come to terms with the fact that we will never be satisfied. We will never arrive at God." He likened us to Moses looking at the Promised Land. We are in this relationship with the divine and there's this desire in us to come closer to God and we will never quite arrive. "But salvation is a journey, not a destination," Gregory might have said, had he written a Hallmark card.

And this truth, this idea that the love of God is something we strive after and get tastes of, but taste which only stir up desire in us more, I think this teaching is especially useful to us in a season like Lent. In a world like ours where virtues like justice and peace remain so elusive because in this world, on this side of salvation, when we stand up for justice, it is easy to become discouraged that justice doesn't arrive.

But Gregory tells us that to stand still is holy and that stand still matters. When we struggle for peace, we become downcast because peace is elusive and fragile. But Gregory tells us that standing up for peace is still holy, and making that stand is its own reward. We do not arrive necessarily as quickly as we would like to arrive, but what becomes infinite about us in our salvation, in our relationship with the infinite God, is not that we too become endless like God, but that God's infinite love beckons us always, again and again, and so we always have further to go. And God knows we do indeed have farther to go.

Thank God, then, for the call of Christ who bids us to follow from his great distance. Please rise for the prayer. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us pray. Almighty God who has revealed to your church your eternal being of glorious majesty and perfect love as one God in Trinity of persons, give us grace that, like your bishop Gregory of Nyssa, we may continue steadfast in the confession of this faith and constant in our worship of you.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who live in reign forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts/Congregation:

And now we 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.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Please join in singing hymn 143.

Congregation:

(Music).

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be among you all and remain with you always. Amen. Let us bless the Lord.