

Laurie Sedgwick:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Laurie Sedgwick:

And welcome to Morning Prayers. Please stand, as you are able, for a responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter. This morning, we'll be reading 164, found on page 83.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me.

Congregation:

I am small and weak. I need your strength and wisdom.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Let me walk in beauty and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset.

Congregation:

Make my hands respect the things you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Make me wise so that I may understand the things you have taught my people.

Congregation:

Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in each leaf and each rock.

Laurie Sedgwick:

I seek strength, not to be greater than my brothers and sisters, but to fight my greatest enemy, myself.

Congregation:

Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes.

Laurie Sedgwick:

So when life fades, as the fading sunset,

Congregation:

my spirit may come to you without shame.

Choir:

(singing)

Ruth Foster:

A reading from the book of Ruth chapter one, beginning at verse 16.

And when Naomi urged Ruth to leave, Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

Ruth Foster:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Ruth Foster:

My name is Ruth Foster. I'm a master's candidate at Harvard Divinity School, and a Frank Knox Memorial fellow at Harvard University. And I'm so happy to be here with you all this morning.

I want to tell you all a story of a journey I went on a few years ago, to rural Vermont. In 2019, I traveled there, to take part in an immersive language program where reading, writing, speaking, or listening, to my native English, was strictly prohibited, out of fear of something called, language pollution, that would've affected my learning, apparently. Effectively, the idea is that you eat, sleep, breathe, the language of destruction, in order to gain fluency.

Upon my arrival, I immediately encountered two major problems. Firstly, I had foolishly not thought to learn the alphabet of the language that I was going to immerse myself in before I arrived. And secondly, I arrived a few days late, so I missed the alphabet class. As a result, I was basically silent for about five weeks. My friends and family back home were certain that I had joined a cult, or gone insane. And honestly, after several days of being unable to articulate myself, I started feeling pretty emotionally and mentally distressed. I remember, I started thinking a lot about who I was, my identity, and I forgotten who I, what my identity even was. I kept thinking over and over to myself in English, in my head, who are we, if you don't have the language or the linguistic tools to express ourselves?

This was especially distressing for me, coming from Northern Ireland, which is, of course, the land of literary greatness. Think C.S. Lewis and Seamus Heaney. You're welcome, world. And the land of subtle linguistic and social cues that reflect what side of the sectarian divide you might come from. And if you don't believe me on the latter point, I can confidently tell you that the fact I said Northern Ireland, rather than north of Ireland, can, to the well-informed, describe everything about me, from what political party I might vote for, to where my father went to school, to where in the kitchen I might store my toaster.

And speaking of Seamus Heaney, one of my favorite poems by him is called, The Ministry of Fear, due to how well it describes these linguistic and social cues. At one point, when he describes an encounter with a police officer at a checkpoint, he needs only state his name Seamus, which is a traditional Irish name, and is associated with someone from a Catholic national background, for the reader to know how he would be treated during the worst time of our conflict.

My parents chose my name, Ruth, in the hope that a biblical name within this setting would buy me a few extra seconds of time, when strangers at home were trying to decipher whether I was one of them, or not.

But it was possibly the strangest setting I could have imagined, the silence of rural Vermont, that these linguistic and social cues that had defined my world for so long, were stripped away. As anyone who's learned a new language will know, the delicacy of linguistic nuance is quickly made redundant. When you're trying to learn how to say as, my name is, I have two brothers, and where is the bathroom? It was within the silence of this new linguistic social and cultural landscape, that I had the opportunity to define myself in my own terms, without the weight of history, politics, or societal division, and sectarian history.

As I said, my parents' decision to call me Ruth was intentional, and done because of the divisions in Northern Irish society. And I also know, you're probably thinking, really? She's talking about the book of Ruth, and her name's Ruth, it was pretty uncreative. Well, I just referenced Seamus Heaney, and I'm from Northern Ireland, so let me have this.

But something I do want to say that you might not realize from the passage that I read at the beginning of this, is that this passage is particularly significant to me, because it's the first time that you hear Ruth's singular voice in the book of Ruth. Although, there are references in the early verses to Ruth speaking with her sister-in-law, this is the first time that she's speaking directly, boldly, and in her own terms.

The book of Ruth is remarkably short, for the historical and theological ground it covers. It's only four chapters and about 80 verses, and it covers war, famine, love, loss, and love again. In the verses preceding the ones that I read, the context is established that Ruth is a Moabite, who marries into a Judean family. When her husband dies, her mother-in-law, Naomi, urges Ruth to return to her own family, her own culture, her own history and society, but Ruth refuses. And in the verses that I read just not only express the loyalty to her new chosen family, articulates her values and her identity, refusing to speak on anyone's terms about her own. And importantly, she doesn't express any distaste for the identity she once had. Only confidence in ones she knows about herself, and who she is now.

The message of the book of Ruth is timeless. To love the stranger. And how we, as human beings, can make connections wherever we go, and truly understand who we are in our own terms, by making those connections. And this means even in the strangest, among this unlikely of circumstances, we can do this. During war, famine, a language school in rural Vermont, or maybe even a year of graduate school, online, in the midst of a global pandemic.

At the beginning of this talk, I asked who are we, if we don't have the language and linguistic tools to express ourselves? But I want to leave you with another question. I also want to ask, what can we discover about ourselves and each other within this silence?

Let us pray. Father God, thank you for the past and connections that have led us to be here together this morning. Give us the confidence and the tools to express ourselves on our own, in our own terms, and heal any divisions that might surround us. Amen.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Please stand, as you are able, and let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying-

Congregation:

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.

Laurie Sedgwick:

Let us sing the hymn, O God, Thou faithful God. Number 280, in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Laurie Sedgwick:

All powerful God. You are present in the whole universe, and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace, with your tenderness, all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation. To recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature, as we journey toward your infinite light. We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love, and peace. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.