

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. I invite you please, to rise, and join in reciting our responsorial Psalm, which is number 28.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Oh Lord. I call to you, my rock, do not disregard me. For if you hold aloof from me, I shall be like those gone down into the pit.

Congregation:

Listen to my plea for mercy, when I cry out to you, when I lift up my hands towards your inner sanctuary.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Do not count me with the wicked and evil doers, who profess goodwill toward their fellows while malice is in their heart.

Congregation:

Give them according to their deeds, their malicious acts, according to their handiwork pay them, give them their deserts.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

The Lord is my strength and shield. My heart trusts in him.

Congregation:

I was helped, and my heart exulted, so I will glorify Him with my song.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

The Lord is their strength. He is a strong hold for the deliverance of his anointed.

Congregation:

Deliver and bless your very own people. Tend them and save them forever.

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

This is a reading from the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, beginning at the 33rd verse.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way, they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. Jesus sat down, called the 12, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them. And taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not me, but the one who sent me." Here endeth the lesson.

In my Episcopal church, yesterday was the feast day of Harriet Starr Cannon. A recent saint, a 19th century American woman. These recent saints are not as fun to preach about as the ancient ones. The ancient ones tend to accrue wild stories around them, which are fun to talk about. But the practice of remembering these people in the church, the wagers that each one has something to teach us, and so we'll try to learn something from Harriet this morning. Harriet, as I said, was a 19th century American woman, who founded the first order of Augustinian nuns in the Anglican Communion. She was born in 1823, to a wealthy stock broker in South Carolina. Her family descended from Huguenots. When she was three, and her younger sister, Catherine, was 17 months old, both her parents died of yellow fever. A relative took them up to Bridgeport, Connecticut, where she was raised. She and her sister were raised by an aunt.

Understandably, she and her sister became very close. In 1844, Harriet visited New York, and started to join New York social life, portraying little of the life that she would eventually lead as a sister in the new order. According to her relative, at the time, Harriet was a great society girl, and not at all religious. Her sister, Catherine married, and moved to California. Harriet moved to Brooklyn, and taught music. But missed her sister, Catherine, and so decided to move out west as well. But then, Catherine died suddenly, and Harriet had to make other plans.

She joined the Sisters of the Holy Communion in New York, which was the first American religious order of both men and women. The order spent its time caring for folks with smallpox. But she had a fight with the founder of the order, and so, she and four other women departed and made their own order, the Community of St. Mary, which persists today, although, the Sisterhood of the Holy Communion does not.

Harriet's community focused on supporting women, children, and the homeless. She built the House of Mercy, which was basically, a women's shelter, on the northern tip of Manhattan, which her sisters ran. She built a school, and a convent, in Peekskill, on the Hudson. She built a summer home for disadvantaged children on the beach in Norwalk, Connecticut, because she loved the ocean, and felt that children should be able to go to the ocean. And several of her sisters went to Memphis, at the invitation of the local bishop, to build a school and an orphanage during a yellow fever epidemic. And many of them died there. She filled her life after her sister's death with good works, with serving exactly the folks Jesus refers to in this gospel passage, which is why, I assume, it is assigned to her on this day. And then, she died at noon on Easter day in 1896. Her remarkable life of service of life, committed to the vulnerable, to the needy, to outcasts, and strangers.

But a few years before her death, Harriet still couldn't speak of her sister, Catherine, without weeping. And she said, just before she died, she said that, if her own sister had not died so young, if Catherine had lived, Harriet confessed, that she would never have become a sister, never founded an order, never served the church, the way she ended up doing. She said it with grief and lament.

One thing we might say about this sad confession from Harriet is that, some good came of even that loss. But I wouldn't say that. I'm wary of silver linings, or of cheap redemptions. The decades of hurt, which haunted Harriet, are decades of hurt. A different Christian response might say, that God meets us in whatever life we find ourselves living, and the opportunity to serve God is never far from us. That's true. But I'm also aware that it is April, late in the academic year. Some of us may be graduating soon, and looking forward to possible futures, or towards futures that have become recently impossible.

And this excessively theological language, that God meets us, may not be the most useful language at this moment, or to those of us who are gathered here, looking towards possible or impossible futures. So instead of saying any of that, I think I will say, that what Harriet Cannon's story reminds us, is that we have to live to do good and to do well.

Even in the sadness of her old age, maybe, especially in the sadness of her old age, when she grieved the life she might have lived, her heroic and lifelong acts of service remind us, that as long as we are in the world, we still have the chance to serve it. Her life reminds us, that being in the world means that the world will meet us in its need. And it will invite us to answer that need with the lives we have been given. Whether the path that opens before us is one we would choose, or some other we might not choose. Along the road we follow, there are always those to whom we might make ourselves precious, the estranged, the outcast, and the vulnerable. And who will become precious to us, if we do.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

I invite you, please, to rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us pray. Gracious God, who called Harriet Starr Cannon and her companions to revive the monastic vocation in the Episcopal Church and to dedicate their lives to you: Grant that we, after their example, may ever surrender ourselves to the revelation of your holy will; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Now we pray words 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.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Please join in singing our hymn, number 145.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God, from generation to generation in the church, and to Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to the Lord.