

Choir:
(singing)

Aaron Abai:
Good morning.

Congregation:
Good morning.

Aaron Abai:

This is a reading from all about love by bell hooks, who is a black feminist scholar and activist. "Love and action is always about service, what we do to enhance spiritual growth. A focus on individual reflection, contemplation, and therapeutic dialogue is vital to healing, but it is not the only way to recover ourselves. Serving others is as fruitful a path to the heart as any other therapeutic practice. To truly serve, we must always empty the ego, so that space can exist for us to recognize the needs of others and be capable of fulfilling them. The greater our compassion, the more aware we are of the ways to extend ourselves to others, to make healing possible."

In all about love, bell hooks makes the argument, that modern society is marked by a culture of lovelessness. Hooks reminds us, that an important part of loving, especially as it relates to nourishing relationships, building community, and healing the spirit, is the act of service to others.

Hook's reminder is one that I've been in need of throughout my time here at Harvard, I'm currently, a senior in Mather House, just a few short weeks away from graduating from this historic institution. If service is the act of devoting oneself to others, I have seen and felt many times, while being a student here, how easy it is to devote oneself solely to oneself. It has been too easy to turn in a problem set and forget about it, without seeking to help those still working on it. To forget the communities where I came from, or to turn a blind eye, to the many people experiencing homelessness in Harvard Square.

It is no secret, that shrouded behind this institution's reputation of academic excellence is a culture of individualism, where it is rewarded to put oneself first. During my freshman year, I was swept into this culture, and in many ways, actively subscribed to it, which led me to feeling extremely lonely and spiritually unfulfilled. Thankfully, I was fortunate to have a steady stream of reminders, through college, about why it was so important to live a life devoted to serving others.

My most recent reminder about the importance of service came just a few weekends ago. Two of my friends and I have been training to run our first half marathon, which we will be running this Sunday in Gloucester, Mass. When signing up for the race, we

were presented the opportunity to register for free, with one stipulation, we would have to volunteer at a prior race. As broke college students, we did not hesitate.

We drove up to Gloucester one sunny and chilly early spring Sunday morning. Our task was to hand out water to runners passing by. Once we arrived at our station, we looked at the time, 9:50 AM. The race was to begin at 10:30, and we were a few miles down the course, so we still had plenty of time to set up, or so we thought. At 10:15, a single runner passed by our station. "How strange.", we thought, "for a runner to be running the course before the race actually started." But by 10:20, the single runner turned into a massive group of very enthusiastic, very thirsty half marathoners. We learned that the race actually started at 10, not 10:30. We were horribly unprepared.

You can probably imagine what happened next. Sometime during the next three hours or so, my friend and I somehow fell into a smooth rhythm. We poured water, smoothly handed the cups off to the runners and cheered for their success.

Though our time together was short that morning, volunteering at this race served as a much needed reminder about why it was so important to serve. By the end, we realized we had completely forgotten about why we were there in the first place.

Throughout my time at Harvard, moments like this have led me to reflect on the ethic of service that I was raised by. My parents, both immigrants from Ethiopia, have served as the clearest examples of service in my life. They've shown me that sacrifice is the highest expression of love. And it is only through their sacrifices that I am here talking to you today.

My mom raised my brothers and I in the Ethiopian Orthodox church, where we volunteered during church services. Not unlike handing out cups of water to thirsty runners, my brothers and I handed out cups of holy water to members of the congregation. Though the context of these experiences cannot be more different, the takeaway was the same. Service to others is an essential part of a spiritually fulfilled life.

Throughout my time at Harvard, I've been reminded about how service comes in many different forms. It has been the generosity shown to me by tutors and dining hall staff in Mather House. It has been the upper class students who've extended themselves as personal mentors throughout my time here. It has been the loving really relationships and friendships that have sustained me through the hardest moments of undergraduate life. And it has been the daily phone calls with my mom, that have reminded me about why I care about service in the first place.

These reminders have kept me grounded through my time here, and have motivated me to follow by example, and in doing so, have lifted my own spirit higher. I believe, that it is the example of service, and it's resulting affect, that makes giving such an important and powerful expression of love. Bell hooks writes, that spiritual seekers let their light shine, so that others may see, not only to give service by example, but also, to constantly remind themselves that spirituality is most gloriously embodied in our actions, our habits of being. I have learned that serving nourishes the spirit. It is through service that we can feel most connected to each other, and to our greater purpose.

Theresa Lungu:

Please stand, as your able, and let us pray. Dear heavenly father, we pray, that the beginning of a new day renews our hearts with strength and purpose, to walk closer in your ways, and in service to others, today and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Theresa Lungu:

And together, let us recite the Lord's prayer 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, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Theresa Lungu:

And let us sing the hymn, There Is a Balm in Gilead, number 306 in the crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Theresa Lungu:

As we go forth into this day, may God's blessing be upon us, and remain with us throughout the day. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.