

Speaker 1:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to morning prayers here at the Memorial Church. I invite you please to join me in reciting our responsorial Psalm, which is number eight in your black psalter. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth. You who have covered the heavens with Your splendor."

Congregation:

"From the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength on account of Your foes, to put an end to enemy and avenger."

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"When I behold your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place."

Congregation:

"What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken notice of him?"

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"That You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty."

Congregation:

"You have made him master over Your handiwork, laying the world at his feet."

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"Sheep and oxen, all of them, the wild beasts, too."

Congregation:

"The birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, whatever travels the paths of the seas."

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth."

Choir:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the 22nd chapter of the Gospel of Luke, beginning at the 24th verse. "A dispute also arose among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But Jesus said to them, 'The Kings of the Gentiles lorded over them, and those in authority over them are called

benefactors. But not so with you; rather, the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." Here ends the lesson.

Those of you who might have joined us for morning prayers last year know that I like to remember saints from my tradition when I come up here and speak before you. Tomorrow we remember one of the earliest Christian saints, Phoebe. We know almost nothing of Phoebe. Phoebe is a first century woman who is mentioned by Paul in his Letter to the Romans, this foundational letter; this important, important piece of early Christian theology. Phoebe was from Cenchreae, which is now, and then also was, a village in Corinth. She was part of the Corinthian Christian community. And as I said, we know almost nothing about her. All we know is that she was important to Paul and to the community. We also know that he called her a deacon. More on that in a minute.

So Paul, when he was writing his Letter to the Romans, had never been to Rome, but he was hoping to raise monies from the Roman community for a mission to Spain. There are two other women with him in Corinth, fellow tent makers, called Priscilla and Aquila, who were from Rome and had been expelled with other Jews in the year 49 by the Emperor Claudius.

Because of Priscilla and Aquila, Paul knew about the Roman community. He knew there was a church there and wanted to write to them. He sent this letter, and scholars believe... There's some contest, some argument, but scholars believe that he gave it to Phoebe, and that Phoebe carried it to Rome.

I said he calls her a deacon. This is where she's gotten a lot of attention, especially in 20th, in 21st century Christian conversations, because deacon is in an ordained position within the Christian Church, or at least in many Christian churches. The word Paul uses when he calls her a deacon, *diákonos*, can be translated as minister, but literally it means servant. And it's clear that Phoebe was this, a servant.

It's also clear that the categories like deacon or presbyter, which is what we call priests or pastors, that these were not yet institutionalized. When institutionalization came, it conspired with Christianity's patriarchal bones to exclude women from those positions. But we know that early women in the church were called deacons. We know that the main job of what were then called priests or presbyters was to teach. And Paul tells us that Priscilla and Aquila were some of the most important teachers in the early Christian community. That they, in fact, corrected and instructed the other most important early Christian teacher, Apollos, at that time. Paul elsewhere says, "Women should not teach," but then he speaks of Priscilla and Aquila being the most important teachers in the community. I think there's a lesson in all this about institutions and institutionalization, and how they can come to constrain exactly what they aim to free. There's that tension here already in our gospel lesson from today where the disciples are talking about who's the greatest, and Jesus asked them to be servants.

The book of Romans is perhaps the most foundational piece of Christian theology that we have. It's not an exaggeration to say that the Protestant Reformation depends upon the book of Romans, the eighth chapter in particular. Augustine's foundational theologian depends upon Romans. And the existence of the book of Romans depends upon Phoebe, because she carried it to Rome. So there's another lesson

here about honoring all manners of ministry, all kinds of work, as essential to the work that we do and aim to do.

But it's not just about that, because what we also know from learning about Phoebe, Priscilla, and Aquila is that Paul was part of a robust Christian community. His theology was not his own theology. It was forged in conversation with these others. It doesn't really belong to him. It's not even quite appropriate to call it his theology.

And so recognizing unseen labor means not only honoring the tasks that go on unhonored, for we should do that, too; but also honoring those whose labor hides behind the work of those who we do honor. And that means, in the case of Paul and the Letter to the Romans, it means honoring these women, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Aquila, and their partnership in ministry with him.

We are embarking upon a new year here at Harvard. A year in which many of us, perhaps all of us, hope to do good work, even great work, to accomplish good and great things. It's important, then, to have a figure like Phoebe to remind us to be grateful for all those who make our work possible. Gratitude and recognition are good virtues with which to begin a year of high aspirations and ambition. And so it is appropriate to say that we remember Phoebe and her essential solemn presence at the foundation of our faith.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Eternal God, who raised up Phoebe as a deacon in Your church and as a minister of Your gospel, grant us that same grace, that assisted by her prayer and example, we too may take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Through Jesus Christ, Your son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Speaker 1 and Congregation:

And now let's pray the prayer that Jesus taught, 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.

Speaker 1 and Congregation:

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, Hymn 299.

Choir/Congregation:
(sings "Amazing Grace").

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
And now, may the God of peace fill you with all joy and hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Congregation:
Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:
Thanks be to God.