

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to morning prayers here in the Appleton Chapel of Harvard Memorial Church. Our speaker this morning is David Hempton, the Alonzo McDonald Family Professor, John Lord O'Brian Professor, and Dean of the Faculty of Divinity. I invite you please to rise and join me in saying our responsorial psalm, which is number 57.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Be merciful to me, O God. Be merciful to me, for in thee my soul takes refuge. In the shadow of thy wings I will take refuge till the storms of destruction pass by.

Congregation:

I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let thy glory be over all the earth.

Congregation:

They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The dug a pit in my way, but they have fallen into it themselves.

Congregation:

My heart is steadfast, O God. My heart is steadfast. I will sing and make melody.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Awake, my soul. Awake, O harp and lyre. I will awake the dawn.

Congregation:

I will give thanks to thee, O Lord, among the peoples. I will sing praises to thee among the nations.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

For thy steadfast love is great to the heavens; thy faithfulness to the clouds.

Congregation:

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth.

Choir:

(Singing).

Dean David N. Hempton:

Good morning, everyone.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Dean David N. Hempton:

Happy Monday morning. I'm going to begin my reading where Sarah Whiting left off on Thursday from the Book of Ecclesiastes 1-13. "There's a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven. A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and the time to dance; a time to tear, and a time to mend; a time to be silent, and a time to speak. What do workers gain from all their toil? I know that there's nothing better for persons than to be happy and do good while they live, that everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil. This is the gift of God."

I want to begin this morning with a sense of realism. There's no point in sugar coating it. We're beginning our academic year together at a very difficult cultural moment in this country and the wider world.

There's so much pessimism and a sense of crisis. The COVID-19 global pandemic, which is still not over, has taken an enormous toll on all of us, and some much more than others. We're facing the greatest racial justice reckoning since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. We're encountering the deepest polarization in American politics since the Civil War. We're facing a planetary climate crisis and the weather catastrophes that come with it. We're experiencing enormous structural inequality as resulting in profound inequality of opportunity. There's a sense of profound unease about the international order and the role we should be playing in it. The cruel war on Ukraine is there all around us. Every day, there seems to be a new grief to absorb and a new painful memory to process.

All this leaves us feeling tired and discouraged. Professionals call it crisis fatigue, languishing, muddling through, sucking it up, hoping for better times ahead, deep sentiment of unease and anxiety, anger and confusion, just plain tired and a bit fed up.

So what is there to be said about all this? I want to speak to you this morning about an experience I had earlier this summer, which I'm still trying to process, but which has made quite an impact on my thinking about universities and community, and how we can begin to move forward. I spent a month at the Bellagio Center in Lake Como in Italy. Someone has to do these things.

Together with 13 others from a remarkably diverse set of backgrounds, we were brought together to work on individual projects around human flourishing, but we were able to interact with one another across disciplines in creative ways. It was a very diverse gathering with a group of intellectuals who were simultaneously running conferences on reparations, first in Bellagio and later in Ghana. These included

Nikole Hannah-Jones, a New York times journalist and Howard University professor who started the 1619 Project.

Other residents included a MacArthur Genius Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning Native American poet, a Japanese musician and composer, a group of distinguished climate change activists, a Stanford Law professor studying the impact of mass incarceration on our legal system, a public health doctor who led New York City's response to the COVID epidemic, a former Lebanese Minister of Health, who now works for the World Health Organization on pandemics, an Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker who specializes in making films about LGBTQ community, an artificial intelligence ethicist, and so on.

We were a group of somewhat random people, united, I suppose, by a desire to make the world a better place, especially around issues of racial justice, climate change, public health crises, and the creative arts. We lived together. We shared meals together. We even danced together. Argued furiously over very contentious issues, everything from reparations to mass incarceration; from Israel, Palestine, to public health disasters; from structural inequalities to America's dark history over its treatment of indigenous and enslaved people. We also disagreed over some very basic issues.

So why am I telling you about this? In some ways, the experience of all of us at Bellagio merge our lives at universities. We are all experiencing something for the first time with high achieving people we have never met before.

So what are the lessons or takeaways from the experience I had? The first is that vigorous discussions and disagreements do not have to be hostile or disrespectful, but they can only happen when people trust one another and respect one another. And trust has to be built. We need to pay attention to one another's life stories and to treat each other as equals, not just as stereotypical assemblages of opinions.

Secondly, be willing to hang out with people you may not feel entirely comfortable with, and be prepared to change our minds. For example, over things like reparation, which I changed my mind over. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. None of us knows what we don't know. Universities are places to find out about the things we don't know, and to have our views subjected to challenge and discussion. Sometimes that will mean changing our minds upon important issues.

Thirdly, build into our schedules time to have fun together and to lighten up. It's hard to be angry with people you're eating, drinking, and dancing with. Nikole Hannah-Jones led us in an instruction in the Electric Slide and the Wobble, which I've never done before. May never do again. So much of our community operated around a sense of fun and enjoyment of one another's company. There is, in the words of Ecclesiastes, it's a time to laugh and a time to dance.

Try to build friendships with people who might not look like you and who may come from very different backgrounds. Most of us did not expect to make enduring friendships with the people we were randomly thrown together with, but we did. Difference does not have to be divisive. In fact, the very opposite.

And then finally, listen to your body and your mind about what works for you, and pay attention to your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. It was striking in our community how people looked out for one another, especially during the little health upsets and emergencies that are sure to come our way, and did come our way in Bellagio. Nothing builds community more than compassion and empathy, especially in times of need and demonstrated vulnerability. Also, nothing builds community more than a sense of fun and enjoyment.

Remember the end of our reading from Ecclesiastes. "I know that there's nothing better for persons than to be happy and do good while they live, that everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all their toil. This is a gift of God." May all of you receive this gift this academic year.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

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

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, in you we live, and move, and have our being. We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life, we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And now let us pray the words Jesus taught us, saying-

The Rev. Matthew Potts & Congregation:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by 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 Potts:

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, Number 81.

Choir/Congregation:

(Singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

May the God of peace fill you with all hopefulness and all joy, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This transcript was exported on Sep 12, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.