

Cheyenne Boon:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Cheyenne Boon:

Welcome to morning prayers. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter book. If you'll please rise in body or spirit, and turn to page 59 to read Psalm 117.

Cheyenne Boon:

Praise the Lord all nations, extol him all peoples.

Congregation:

For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord.

Choir:

(Singing)

Cheyenne Boon:

When the Reverend George Buttrick, once the minister of this church, some of you may be familiar with his conference room downstairs, when he gave a sermon on the biblical story of the prodigal son in 1962, he spoke of the perils of trying to be somebody. He said that in our efforts to set ourselves apart from each other and show our neighbors how important we are. We inevitably fall short of our own expectations and end up believing that we must be nobody. In the story of the practical son, the prodigal leaves his family and goes to the city to prove himself somebody, but he ends up destitute and alone. Fearing he must be nobody after all, he then returns to his family and is welcomed with a huge feast. Thus, we arrive at the third phase in the process, coming home. Ending his sermon Buttrick said, "The somebody stage and the nobody stage are both unreal. A person is a person only when he says I will go home".

This summer I worked as an intern chaplain in a hospital in Denver, Colorado. Late in the summer, I visited a patient who I will call Jim, in this story. He was in his second month of a complicated recovery from cancer surgery. And when I entered his hospital room, Jim's wife was with him, explaining to me that she had asked for the chaplain to come so that Jim would be less confused when she left the hospital for the day. "He was doing better now", she told me, "but after his surgery, Jim struggled to separate imagination and reality". After Jim's wife left the room, he began to tell me about his old delusions. After his surgery, he had believed that everyone in the hospital was part of a CIA mission to take over his mind and control him, maybe even kill him. He didn't think he could trust anyone in the hospital.

He said, "So I thought about who I could trust to verify who I was if anything happened to me. And I thought of an old student of mine who lives in Minnesota now, and I called him and I said, 'they're going to call you tomorrow and ask about me. And I need you to tell them I was here'". And when he said that, I felt like I lost my breath for a second. I remembered the feeling of being in a strange place and worrying that if something happened, no one would know who I was. I remembered the way that anonymity and loneliness often go together. Jim was describing a delusion, but all I could think was, yes, I understand. I want that too. "When they call you, tell them I was here."

Jim continued to tell me about the people he needed to confirm his identity. He said, "Of course I trust my wife, but that's too much to put on her by herself". I asked him if he had called all these people from his hospital room and he held up his cell phone to me and he said, "Oh yeah, it's all in here". But then he said, "But it was a good three or four days of work", which, okay, sometimes as a hospital chaplain, you just say, okay. But I left his room and I felt like that story was still with me. "When they call you, tell them I was here."

In the hospital, Jim looked around after more than 70 years building a life he loved and feared himself to be nobody. He found himself surrounded by strangers in an unfamiliar place, with only his wife to testify to who he was and to witness what was happening to him.

Jim's fear is perhaps one that many of us share, that when we aren't in our lives anymore, there will be no evidence we were ever there. Or perhaps he was afraid that there was no one in the hospital to confirm to him who he was when he lost himself in pain or confusion or medication. There was no one to say, "Yes, this is you. You are still here. I know who you are". I wonder if you've ever felt this way, that you were anonymous for a moment or that you were the only one around who knew who you were. Who would you call to testify to your living? Who could say who you are? Who might call you to do the same?

Jim called his former student, a person to whom he had taught construction 10 years earlier. And at least according to Jim, that person agreed to verify his existence, should the need arise. Days later, I was still struck not only by the kindness of this other person, but also by the fact that when Jim searched his whole contact list for the people who could best confirm who he was, Jim chose a student. He chose someone who had learned from him, teaching and construction being two acts, which continued to have impact long after the person who has done them dies. And of course, the whole story Jim told me centered around a psychological malady which went away over time. Of course, the hospital staff were not spies trying to kill him. Of course, no one was going to call Jim's former student in Minnesota to ask who Jim was. But underneath all that, Jim knew exactly what it would take for him to come home to himself, to let go of his fear that he was nobody, to let go of his need to make himself somebody.

He needed a person who loved him, his wife, a person who had learned from him, his former student, and a few others he fully and deeply trusted. Perhaps some of these people hadn't heard from Jim in years, but they still picked up the phone and agreed to his request. "When they call me, I'll tell them you were here." Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Cheyenne Boon:

If you'd please rise in body or spirit and join me in prayer. Gracious God, to you all hearts are open and all desires are known. Help us to open our hearts to the needs of those around us. Give us the strength to ask for help and to give it. Remind us always of who we are. Bring us home to ourselves. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Cheyenne Boon:

And now please join in the prayer that Jesus taught us saying-

All:

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.

Cheyenne Boon:

Please join and sing hymn number 271, I love Thy Kingdom, Lord.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing).

Cheyenne Boon:

As we go into this day, let us bless and keep one another. Let us make peace. Let us be at peace. May it be so and may the church say, amen.

Congregation:

Amen.