

Harriet Lindeman:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Harriet Lindeman:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Professor Demba Ba, Associate Professor of Electrical Engineering and Bioengineering. Welcome.

Please rise, in body or in spirit for our responsive reading, Psalm 104 found in your Black Psalter.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, You are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty.

Congregation:

You use the clouds as your chariot and ride on the wings of the wind.

Harriet Lindeman:

You set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the winds of the wind.

Congregation:

You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.

Harriet Lindeman:

You set the earth on its foundations so that it shall never be shaken.

Congregation:

You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.

Harriet Lindeman:

At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take flight.

Congregation:

They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them.

Harriet Lindeman:

May the glory of the Lord endure forever. May the Lord rejoice in His works.

Congregation:

Who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke.

Harriet Lindeman:

You may be seated.

Choir:  
(singing).

Demba Ba:  
Good morning.

Harriet Lindeman:  
Good morning.

Demba Ba:  
I'd like to begin my remarks by thanking Reverend Potts for having me here, Harriet, and Memorial Church for inviting me.

Last night, I had a dream actually, of speaking here a few hours ago, and in that dream, and I've never opened a Bible up to this passage. I've actually never opened a Bible before in my life. And this dream pointed me to Romans. So when I came here, I asked Harriet if she could open up the Bible to Romans, so I could read you a passage from there.

I was asked to share some words from the spirit, I came thinking that I would share. There's a passage that I would read you, which is a poem, but I would also like to read you this passage from Roman.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God to our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we obtain access to this grace in which we stand and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured in our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The remarks I want to make today are remarks on service. So I'm an academic, I've lived an academic life for the past 20 years or so. And I want to challenge us in this academic setting, to think about how we may broaden our perspective of what service means. So when I share these remarks, I want each of us sitting here to think, in this academic setting in which we operate, what do we actually think about when we think about service?

I want to share something with you. I want to share a poem by Lydia Davis, that I think will encapsulate a lot of the remarks that I'll make and that I'll keep it short.

I think I know the sort of person I am, but then I think, but the stranger will imagine me quite otherwise when he or she hears this or that to my credit. For instance, that I have a position at the university: the fact that I have a position at the university will appear to mean, that I must be the sort of person who has a position at the university. But then I have to admit, with surprise, that, after all, it is true, that I have a position at the university. And if it is true, then perhaps I really am the sort of person you imagine when you hear that a person has a position at the university.

But, on the other hand, I know I'm not the sort of person I imagine, when I hear that a person has a position at the university. Then I see what the problem is: when others describe me in this way, they appear to describe me completely, whereas in fact they do not describe me completely, and a complete description of me would include truth that seemed quite incompatible with the fact that I have a position at the university.

So, service. I just submitted my promotion package for tenure at Harvard. I've spent seven years here. So very briefly, for those of you who do not know about this process, this is the day of judgment for me in some sense. This is the day of judgment for me. And with that, So I felt very excited in the sense that, it gave me a chance to sit back and look at my accomplishments of the past seven years. I felt very proud of myself. Two other unexpected emotions I felt. So one was the dread at the potential outcome of this judgment. Which seemed quite irrational for me, because after all, by all accounts, I'm a very fortunate person. I come from a village in Africa where we only got electricity recently. I can feed myself in the time I want. I have health. I have people that love me surrounding me. So I'm very fortunate. But the other emotion that I felt, was a sort of sorrow and grief for the following reasons.

So as part of this tenure promotion package, you're asked to put together a document that describes the service you've performed. Right? And why the sorrow and the grief, you might ask? Because, some of the most important service work that I perform, or that I'm proud of, would never make it to this document. And if we really think about it, in this academic setting that we live in, service work, such as was performed by Jesus Christ, and we can name all of the prophets, and all of the great men and women of history. Right? Service to the poor, service to the needy, and so on and so forth, is not the kind of thing that is meant when one is asked to put together this document. And this made me feel sad for the following reason. For the reason that, for a lot of us, particularly a lot of us that come from immigrant communities, that come from disadvantaged groups in the US and minorities. When people see our Harvard affiliation, they cannot begin to imagine or fathom the magnitude of the service that we have to perform that will never make it to a tenure promotion package. They don't hear about the proportion of your paycheck that you have to send monthly home because, well, some of your relatives do not have pensions. They do not hear about the phone calls you receive requesting advice, soliciting advice, because of course, you're a Harvard professor, so you have the answers to all of life's questions. Right? They do not see the time you spend with members of the Cambridge community here, for who Harvard is such a beacon, but who come from such background that for them to imagine their kids ending up one day here, for them to run into their life, into somebody who's a Harvard professor, they could have never imagined that.

Why am I saying all of this? I'm not saying all of this because, when I think about service, so to me, you're performing sort of a service for me here, just by virtue of your presence and the time that you're giving me. And I do not think that we recognize the magic that simply showing up creates in other people's life. And how did I learn all of this? I came to reflect when I was invited to share some words here, is spending time with my maternal grandmother, so the love of my life. And together with what I see, as a deeply African perspective on human relations, she taught me the lesson that service and showing up for others, particularly those less fortunate, changes everything.

And I will finish with the following remarks. I just became a US citizen after 23 years. And prior to this, I did not feel as much of a stake in the experiment that is the United States as I do now. I love this country. I realize that I love this country. And I see the undue attention on our individual fortunes that we have right now, so us being all siloed in our own emotions, as one of the key reasons behind the divisions that we face. And I think, that if each of us asked ourselves just a very simple question every day, "How can I show up and serve my brother or my sister?" In very minute ways, I think we might just shift our attention from what divides us to finding solutions to the problems that face us, solutions such that we can all win in the end. Thank you for your attention.

Harriet Lindeman:

Please rise, in body or spirit, for prayer.

Oh God of love, be with us on this day that you have made. May we find spaced pause and be in the beauty of this vibrant fall and find meaning from the words we have received, finding space to offer service.

And now, let us speak the words Jesus taught us.

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.

Harriet Lindeman:

Let us sing the hymn, From Thee All Skill And Science Flow, number 346.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing).

Harriet Lindeman:

And to now, may the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Go in peace. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.