

Courtney Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Courtney Godwin:

Welcome to morning prayers. Please stand for our responsive reading, Psalm number 13, found in your black psalter.

How long, O Lord, will you ignore me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

Congregation:

How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day? How long will my enemies have the upper hand?

Courtney Godwin:

Look at me, answer me, O Lord my God. Restore the luster to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.

Congregation:

Lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him," my foes exult when I totter.

Courtney Godwin:

But I trust in your faithfulness. My heart will exalt in your deliverance.

Congregation:

I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me.

Courtney Godwin:

You may be seated.

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross:

Good morning Harvard.

Congregation:

Morning.

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross:

Good morning Harvard.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross:

I would suspect by this time that some of you have been praying that God would move the morning a little later in the afternoon for us non-morning people. It is good to be here with you. I have an announcement. As long as there are midterms at Harvard, there will be prayer in school. Can I get an amen on that, students?

According to what I have been informed, these gatherings at daybreak have gone nearly uninterrupted since 1636, about 386 years. Therefore, I am to assume one of two things: that either Harvard has an impossible to crack curriculum, or the student body, that would be us, we all exaggerated a little bit on our admissions applications, at least some of us in the Master of Religion and Public Life cohort at Harvard. Nevertheless, it worked out. We are all here. So why stop praying now?

And so this morning I gratefully add my voice to the long chorus of those of my fellow Harvard-distinguished affiliates to briefly but urgently address you for yet another morning prayer service at the heart of campus here in the Memorial Church. And who is the "I" that stands before you? I am a lot of things.

First of all, I'm a student in the Master of Religion and Public Life program at Harvard Divinity School. But I am also a descendant of those centered upon in the Harvard Legacy of Slavery Report. I am among the faces of those whose fate now hangs in the balance in Harvard's United States Supreme Court case, where justices will decide whether or not to turn back the hands of time and shut the door on affirmative action.

I am Emmett Till's proxy and the hopeful beneficiary of the century's long-delayed John Lewis Anti-Lynching Law. But not only that, I am the passion of Black Lives Matter and the poise of Gandhi's namaste. I am my grand-mama's hot water cornbread and my Jewish mother's unleavened bread. I'm Morehouse College book smart and South Side Chicago street smart. I'm a globe-trotting universal human and one of the boys from the hood. I stand on the front lines, challenging injustice against the marginalized and underserved, but I'm the first in line for reservations at a Michelin star restaurant. I think I've seen a few of you in there.

I'm very upset with the injustices that my people face. And I'm positive that the future does not equal the past. I am a [foreign language 00:09:45]. I can dine with royalty and work with queens. I'm a stranger to no one and a brother to everyone. I hate what hurts my people, my people being all people. And I love everyone just the same. I worship no human but I bow to any God everywhere and every God anywhere. I believe we were all born worthy and there are no throwaway people. I am a black optimist who has seen the worst of humanity but somehow still praise and believes that the best is yet to be. And because I believe in prayer, my text is a prayer attributed to the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose familiar words read thusly: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

And while many of us are inspired by Niebuhr's words, some of us do not have the luxury of accepting the things we cannot change. Some of us have no other option but to find a way out of no way. And it is imperative that we who have the privilege to come to places like Harvard, that we be sure to stay out of the business of accepting the so-called things we cannot change. Because as goes Harvard, come on, so goes the nation, for better or for worse.

When race scientists at Harvard provided the intellectual justification for continued subjugation of enslaved people, so went the nation. Thus, the kinds of prayers that we pray from this institution should

be those that counter any narrative that would suggest that there is such a thing as an unchangeable thing. I want to challenge you this morning to repeat something after me. Would you be willing to try that on, since we're all up early anyway? Say it with me. There is no such thing...

Congregation:

There is no such thing...

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross:

... as an unchangeable thing.

Congregation:

... as an unchangeable thing.

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross:

Come on, try it on again For emphasis. There is no such thing...

Congregation:

There is no such thing...

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross:

... as an unchangeable thing.

Congregation:

... as an unchangeable thing.

The Rev. Kevin Kitrell Ross:

There are simply unchanged hearts and unchanged minds. So the function of prayer is not to send God out on errands to do our bidding but to invite the God of your understanding, of our understanding, to empower us to do God's bidding.

Rather than being defeated by the onslaught of negativity cluttering the headlines and news feeds across the globe, let us have the moral imagination to reinterpret the dimmest headlines as the world's most urgent prayer request. Let me say that again for emphasis. Let us have the moral imagination to reinterpret the dimmest headlines as the world's most urgent prayer request. We are not here to pray for the system to change. We are here to develop the strategy that will change the system. We don't come to places like Harvard to pray for the world to change. We come to a place like Harvard to link arms with our brothers and sisters in the spirit of Ubuntu and together we change the things that we can no longer accept.

We in essence declare the words of that great unity hymn, "Let there be peace on Earth and let it begin with me." And so the question we must consider as we move to embody our prayers, is a question that was posed by the great theorists and some might say, theologians, the O'Jays. They said, "Now that we've found love, what are we going to do with it?" I have one suggestion. Let us pray.

God, grant Harvard the serenity to face the things we fear to change, the audacity to lead the change that we must, and the wisdom to know that we must be the change we wish to see in the world. In the name of a love supreme, we pray. [Foreign language 00:15:59], amen. And so it is.

Courtney Godwin:

Please rise in body or spirit to recite The Lord's prayer.

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, for ever and ever. Amen.

Courtney Godwin:

Now let us the Hymn number 331, Love is Kind and Suffers Long. (singing).

God, as we leave this place, remind us that there is no such thing as an unchangeable thing. And encourage us to make the changes so that we can live in your kingdom. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.