

Harriet Lindeman:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Harriet Lindeman:

And welcome to Morning Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Professor Richard Parker at the Harvard Kennedy School. Welcome.

Please rise in body or in spirit, and join in reading Psalm 18, found in your black psalter.

I adore You O Lord, my strength,

Congregation:

O LORD, my crag, my fortress, my rescuer, my God.

Harriet Lindeman:

My rock in whom I seek refuge. My shield, my mighty champion, my haven.

Congregation:

Ropes of death encompassed me; torrents of Belial terrified me.

Harriet Lindeman:

Ropes of Sheol encircled me; snares of death confronted me.

Congregation:

In my distress I called on the Lord. I cried out to my God; in His temple He heard my voice; my cry to Him reached His ears.

Harriet Lindeman:

You have given me the shield of your protection. Your right hand has sustained me. Your care has made me great.

Congregation:

You have let me stride on freely, my feet have not slipped.

Harriet Lindeman:

For this I sing your praise among the nations. Lord, and hymn your name.

Congregation:

He accords great victories to His king, keeps faith with His anointed, with David and his offspring forever.

Harriet Lindeman:

You may be seated.

Choir:

(Singing)

Richard Parker:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Richard Parker:

I noted in the program that I'm listed as Richard Parker of the Law School. I'm not sure whether it's a benefit or a curse that you have an economist and not a lawyer in front of you, but I'll let you reach that decision at the end of my remarks.

My reading for today is the first six verses of the first Psalm.

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the council of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, in his law that he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the river of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf shall also not wither and whatsoever he'd doeth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore, the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. But the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.

We're gathered here for reflection and prayer, and so let me start with a reflection and then end with a prayer. Here's the reflection. Next Tuesday is election day, an especially important one. We are, at least according to pollsters and the chattering classes, divided, distrustful, tired of our democracy's quarrels, many of us angry and contemptuous toward our fellow citizens. And increasingly, even to the possibility of democracy itself. A noisy minority even roars its doubts that we can go on, or ought to go on as a nation and people in common. That seems to me, not just dismay or frightening, but flat out wrong. For the most elemental reason to you who are worshiping here today with me, it would be an abandonment of faith.

Now by faith I mean the word in the way that the Harvard trained sociologist Robert Bella, half a century ago, described it, to explain what he called America's civil religion. In unfolding his idea of civil religion, Bella did something you and I here this morning engaged in rather more conventional and recognizable religious practice should pay close attention to. Because we live in a moment when too many among us have lost clear sight of our civil religion, and its role outside our conventionally familiar religious faith. And we have made too much room for a woundedness, a vindictiveness, a pettiness, that should rightly be a source of deep shame, and should be called out for what it is, a form, the worst form of harassment.

Now let me be clear, in raising Bella's idea of civil religion here in this church. I know there's all I'm going to America's pews, and in America's pulpits, that politics and religion shouldn't mix. As if the two were coherently separate domains in which the collective civil and political acts we undertake through politics, and the principles and the policies by which we justify them, don't bear an insoluble bond with

the God, or Gods, who we worship. Politics and religion, and most especially in America, Bella argues are inseparable. And I agree.

Let me stress what I'm not saying here. I like, most of you, am quite proud of our founder's Constitutional separation of church and state. Too often nowadays. I think our pride is poorly thought out, because it disrespects the centrality and the need of faith for our politics. The centrality of Bella's civil religion, that exists alongside of and because of our traditional religious beliefs. That separation the founders mandated, addressed 18th century issues, that had been raised first by the Protestant Reformation, and then by the Enlightenment, the two powerful and elemental sources of who we are today. The Reformation, to be clear, had pressed not principally to separate church and state, but to establish the primacy of individual choice in matters of belief. In this, it was responding to and revolting against the intricate and ancient interweaving of absolutist monarchy and medieval Catholicism as the one Christianity in Europe.

But the enlightenment had then gone further. Building on that Protestant ideal of individual religious freedom is it articulated civic human rights, that caustically eroded the unitary privilege of Catholicism, and religiously protected claims of monarchic privilege. It had substituted for the faith-based inequality of ruler and rule, and equality of all, with faith relocated in the citizen, and the superiority of governance through the demos.

Now, America's history of rule by demos has, of course, always been flawed and incomplete, and our struggles with race and gender and sexual identity today are just the latest chapter in that ongoing struggle. But the thread that runs through our history, which long ago carried us past the 18th century's primeval establishment of individuality of government by consent, and without the oppressions of a single sanctioned state religion, is in danger of unraveling as we lose faith in our civil religion, that since the American Revolution has served to bind us together, however imperfectly or in completely.

We cannot survive alone. And we can only thrive together when we share an abiding rich and generous faith in who we can be as Americans. When we stand awed and in silence at the Lincoln Memorial, when we take in the majesty of our national parks, when we recall the courage of men and women who have fought and died for what America might be, or when we reflect on "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.", we are practicing our civil religion. When we vote, when we assure the right of all Americans to vote. When any American, of whatever race, or gender, or age, or ability, can become an elected leader with those votes, we are practicing our civil religion.

But when we're left alone, and encouraged only to fault the Americans we merely are or have been, we occlude that vision of what is possible, and who we might be. Without faith in that vision and those possibilities, without embracing and affirming what Bella rightly calls our civil religion, not as our flawed reality, but as our endless quest for what we still could be, we will fail as a nation and as a people.

So here in this house of worship today, let us silently promise one another this, we shall not fail. And with a Tuesday of great import only days away, let me offer a prayer for our national faith, and our national home, and for what it is that we might still be.

Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring. Ring with the harmonies of liberty. Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies. Let it resound loud as the rolling sea. Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us. Sing a song full of hope that the present has brought us. Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, let us march on till victory is won. God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far on the way, keep us forever in the path we pray. Shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand true to our God, true to our native land, our, our native land.

Harriet Lindeman:

Please rise in body or in spirit for prayer. And now, let us pray as 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:

And now, let sing the hymn, Life of Ages, Richly Poured, number 353.(singing).And 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.