

Courtney Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Courtney Godwin:

Welcome to Morning Prayers at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning is Dr. Sherri Charleston and she will be kicking off our week dedicated to honoring and celebrating Black History Month this week at Morning Prayers. Will you please rise and join me in our responsive Psalm number 25 in your black psalter?

To you, oh God, I lift up my soul. My God, I put my trust in you. Let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

Congregation:

Let none who look to you be put to shame, but let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.

Courtney Godwin:

Show me your ways, oh God, and teach me your paths.

Congregation:

Lead me in your truth and teaching, for you are the God of my salvation, in you have I trusted all the day long.

Courtney Godwin:

Remember, oh God, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.

Congregation:

Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions. Remember me according to your love, and for the sake of your goodness, oh God.

Courtney Godwin:

Gracious and upright are you, therefore, you teach sinners in your way.

Congregation:

You guide and humble in doing right and your ways to the lowly.

Courtney Godwin:

All your paths are love and faithfulness to those who keep your covenant and your testimonies.

Congregation:

Let integrity and uprightness preserve me, for my hope has been in you.

Courtney Godwin:

You may be seated.

Choir:

(Singing)

Sherri Ann Charleston:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Sherri Ann Charleston:

When I was asked to deliver remarks this morning, part of the prompt came with instruction that all I needed to do was to speak my own truth. And so as most searches for truth begin nowadays, I started with Facebook. And there, I found inspiration from a question that a friend of mine post. She said, "How many of you know all of the lyrics to Lift Every Voice and Sing?" And so I'll ask you all the same question. Does anyone know all of the lyrics to Lift Every Voice and Sing? This will be a test.

Well, growing up in the Black Baptist Church in Detroit, my church was led by Reverend Dr. Samuel L. Whitney. Dr. Whitney, as he was called, had been called to pastor at the prospect from Jackson, Mississippi. He was a commanding preacher who seemed like he was 10 feet tall. And now I realize he was probably about 5'8", though I can't really remember for sure. But he had this very humble origin story. And it's not exactly clear to me exactly at what point Lift Every Voice and Sing and Black History Month became a part of the regular ethos. But I do realize that at one point, I had vivid memories of all of us linking arms in church, swaying side to side, singing all three verses of this great poem by James Weldon Johnson.

And I don't know at what point it became clear to me that those who sat around me, Dr. Whitney, Dr. Vera Pige, others, had actually been involved in the civil rights struggle in Mississippi and elsewhere. Dr. Pige, Dr. Vera Pige, the name elicited laughter and chuckles from me when I was a child, I'll have to admit. Miss Piggy, Dr. Pige. I didn't realize that Dr. Vera Pige was a civil rights icon who had migrated from Mississippi to Detroit after founding the Council of Federated Organizations in 1924 and being an early civil rights organizer. I didn't actually realize that she was famous until I read John Dittmer's Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi once I got to graduate school.

By 1961, she was advising members of the youth council, including her own child, children who were as young as 14 years old, in integrating waiting rooms across the south. She herself, successfully led to the ultimate desegregation of the Greyhound bus terminal in Clarksdale, Mississippi. By 1961, Dr. Pige had been undeterred by all of the threats against her life, leading several successful protests in Mississippi.

So by Black History Month, as we sat there and we swayed together with Reverend Whitney presiding over the service, he himself, would tell us stories of marching with Dr. King, with John Lewis and others, of being attacked by dogs. And we would see pictures of him doing so. And so this became part of our tradition, the call and response, a collective remembering, a collective meditation, as we crossed our arms and we invoked the lessons of the ancestors.

So I won't sing because I don't want to torture you, but I will say, Lift Every Voice and Sing is never meant to be sung solo. It is always meant to be sung together. And in it, we hear a familiar reprise: Let it

resound loud as the rolling sea. Sing a song full of faith that the dark past has taught us, sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us. Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, let us march on till victory is won.

These songs, these poems in the tradition of African American storytelling and African American musical traditions carry with them both past and truth put to meter.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died; yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet come to the place for which our father's sighed? We have come over a way with tears have been watered, we have come treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered, out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

It was through these songs that we learned the history of black music, black composers, black creators, black struggle, black institution-building. We rehearsed their sacrifices to never forget and captured in those lessons was a history of black America as told through music and song. It was lost on me being in a way that is not lost on me now, that we sang those lyrics with people who were very much present at the time. And in so doing, were invoking a collective consciousness that we now use to push ourselves forward.

Now, it may be hard to understand and recognize some of those same familiar strategies in current day music for those of us who don't listen to hip hop. But if we listen to Pulitzer Prize winning Kendrick Lamar, we see something very similar.

Wouldn't you know, we've been hurt? We've been down before. When our pride is low, looking at the world like where do we go? And we hate popo, want to kill us dead in the street, for sure. I'm at the preacher's door and my knee's getting weak and my gun might blow, but we going to be all right.

It may feel different, but it's a familiar refrain. It's a call for humanity. It's a call for using the same imagery that James Weldon Johnson used in other books of poetry, from *God's Trombones* to the work that he did with *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, using the genre of the black preacher, as both storyteller and truth teller, to preach a word of hope, even in the face of overwhelming anger and despair.

And so now, as we round out this week, now as we begin Black history month, on the heels of the murder of Tyre Nichols, we now find ourselves again, singing these same words of prayer, these same words of invocation, these same words of conscious collective raising. And I share with you two things.

One, the story of prayer that I invite you all to through James Weldon Johnson: God of our weary ears, God of our silent tears, thou who has brought us thus far on the way, thou who has by that might, led us into the light. Keep us forever in the path we pray.

And I also leave you with the prayer, the invocation, of Kendrick Lamar: we going be all right.

Courtney Godwin:

Will you please rise in body or spirit for the Lord's prayer? 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, for ever and ever. Amen.

Please join in singing the Hymn number 331, love is kind and suffers long.

Congregation/Choir:
(Singing)

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Courtney Godwin:

Dear Lord, you have led us into the light. As we go into this day, lead us into assurance that we going be all right. Amen.