

Courtney Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Courtney Godwin:

Welcome to Morning Prayers at Appleton Chapel. Will you please rise as you are able, and read our responsive Psalm number 25?

To you, O 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; let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.

Courtney Godwin:

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

Congregation:

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

Courtney Godwin:

Remember, O 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, O God.

Courtney Godwin:

Gracious and upright are you; therefore you teach sinners in your ways.

Congregation:

You guide the humble in doing right and teach your way 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:

Please be seated.

Choir:
(singing)

Zachary B. Zumwalt:

I am not a dog person. I want to make that clear from the start. But after three years of pairing my children's doe-eyed pleading with cold hard logic, followed by my unsuccessful 2018 2019 charm defensive involving dog sitting opportunities and two hamsters, I could no longer delay the inevitable.

We returned to the US in mid-December. The WHO classified the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic in March. And we adopted an eight-week-old quarantined puppy from a rescue shelter. His name is Dr. Watson. He's 15 pounds, little guy, and he's now three years old. It's humbling and intimidating to be standing here this morning. I can imagine all the great speakers, all the great thinkers, all the great words spoken before and after me here from this very pulpit. So with the five to seven minutes graciously given me this morning, I could draw from my 19 years of experiences in the Navy, and share a message of service and patriotism serving along those who sacrifice for this country appropriate for Memorial Church.

Or I could reflect on my eight years of pastoring churches, to pass on to you an inspirational message of community, and forgiveness, and renewal, appropriate for this Lenten season.

Or I could share with you some wisdom about God and our world that I've learned at the Divinity School, appropriate for this audience. So you know, topics worthy of your time in this venue. And instead, I'm here at Morning Prayers talking about my dog.

When we leave Watson at home, he whines and rings his bell at the door begging to go with us, and as we drive away, he jumps on the back of the couch, where he keeps watch out the front window for our return. He doesn't know that we're sad during our absence as well. He doesn't know that we're with him in spirit, though not physically. He doesn't know we've gone out to get him more dog food. And he doesn't know that we've oriented our errand around him, making sure that we get back in time to let him out to potty. Every time we get home, Watson is at the front window watching for us. And when we open the door, his excitement so overwhelms him that after a few frantic jumps and kisses, he starts sprinting as fast as he can in circles around the yard until he finally exhausts himself.

There's no correlation that I've been able to tell between his bursting enthusiasm in the state of our relationship before we left the house. Nor is his exuberance dependent on the length of our absence. He's equally elated to see us after five minutes as five hours. He's overcome by raw unmitigated, unconditional, inexplicable love when he is finally reunited with his family.

Now occasionally, we do take Watson with us to the vet, for his routine wellness checkup or his next round of annual shots. Watson's figured out the vet. I don't know if he's memorized the drive, or if he recognizes the building, but his little body starts trembling as we pull into the parking lot. You see, he doesn't like to be poked and prodded in a sterile room on a stainless steel table, even though it's us that's put him there because we want him to be healthy. He doesn't like the shots and the blood draws, though the peanut butter's nice, regardless if the shots are for his own good.

Since the start of the pandemic, we've spent a lot of our past three years outdoors, walking and playing in the woods. If he were here, Watson would tell you, his favorite thing to do in all the world is to chase squirrels in the forest. He's learned this S word, and if anyone utters it, he'll perk up and start looking around, even inside or in the car. And if during our outings he hears a rustling of the leaves, that could be a squirrel, he freezes, points, and lifts one of his front paws. We don't know where he gets his from. It must be in his DNA somewhere.

Finally, I've noticed, that since Watson came into our family three years ago, I've gotten less attention from my wife and three kids. Watson gets all the snuggles on the couch, he gets the cutting board scraps in the kitchen, and I'm pretty sure he gets told I love you more often than I do on a daily basis. Now I'm not jealous, but I do remind everyone that while I'm out working to provide for this family, all Watson does is roll over when someone comes near so that his belly can be scratched. I just don't see Watson's relationship with us as anything other than parasitic, taking but not giving, which I point out to him frequently.

So I reiterate, I'm not a dog person. I'm a Christian, a chaplain, a want to be theologian. And I confess my understanding and appreciation of God has changed since Dr. Watson joined our family.

When we leave Watson behind at the house, sad, lonely, and maybe even a little afraid, I understand John 14 just a little better. Don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and also in me. My father's house has many rooms and I am going there to prepare a place for you and I will come back and take you with me, so you may be where I am.

When Watson can't contain his excitement as we walk up to the sidewalk of our house, I can more personally relate to Luke 15. But while he was still a long way off, the prodigal's father saw him and ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. For the father's son was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found.

When we take Watson to the vet, against his will and in his ignorance to get medicine, Proverbs 3 makes more sense. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding, in all of your ways submit to Him and He will make your paths straight.

When Watson is bounding around the woods, the happiest he could ever possibly be, I witness in real time, Isaiah 55. Go out in joy, be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will burst with song, the trees of the forest will be exuberant in applause. No more thistles but giant sequoias. No more thorn bushes, but stately pines. Monuments, living and lasting evidence of God.

And finally, when Watson seemingly just receives and never gives in our relationship, Acts 17 becomes more illuminated. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord, and He is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything from us. Rather, He gives Himself, everyone life and breath and everything in it. You see, conceptually, I knew that God never abandons us, cherishes our relationship with Him, provides for our needs, and even dotes on us out of His perfect love, which we cannot ever reciprocate. But it took Dr. Watson's arrival to make tangible these concepts, for which I am daily grateful to God for, and perhaps will eventually even turn me into a dog person.

Amen.

Courtney Godwin:

Will you please rise in body or spirit for prayer?

Eternal God, in whom we live, and move, and breath, and have our belief, accept, oh Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of the world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Courtney Godwin:

Together let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying...

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, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Courtney Godwin:

Please join in singing our hymn, number 256, Eternal Father, Strong to Save.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

Courtney Godwin:

God, you have created this world and provided everything that we need. So let us greet you as a dog greets its owners when they return. Let us love you unconditionally, and let us learn all there is to learn from even the smallest of your creatures. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.