

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning, there we go, is our very own Benjamin Schafer, Harvard College class of 2019. And as many of you know, a beloved member of this congregation, even though he has since wandered into the wildernesses of New Haven. Please rise in body or spirit for our responsive Psalm reading number 51. "Have mercy upon me, oh, God, after thy great goodness. According to the multitude of thy mercies, do away mine offenses."

Congregation:

Wash me thoroughly from my weakness, and cleanse me from my sin.

Elizabeth Propst:

"For I acknowledge my faults and my sin is ever before me."

Congregation:

Against thee only have I sinner, and done this evil in thy sight, that thou mightest be justified in thy saying and clear when thou shalt judge

Elizabeth Propst:

"Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. Thou shalt wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."

Congregation:

Thou shall make me hear of joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

Elizabeth Propst:

"Turn my face from my sins and put out all my misdeeds"

Congregation:

Make me a clear hear, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Elizabeth Propst:

Cast me not away from God presence and take not by Holy Spirit from me.

Congregation:

P give me the comfort of thy help again and stablish me with thy feww Spirit.

Choir:
(singing)

Benjamin J. Schafer:

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah chapter 58, beginning at the sixth verse. "Is not this, the fast that I choose to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go freed and to break every yoke?" Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin work worth doing? Good morning.

Congregation:
Good morning.

Benjamin J. Schafer:

I was very excited to go home for the holidays this December after three demoralizing semesters of doctoral training and amidst a push toward my comprehensive exams, the draw of two weeks at home, even if they were a working holiday, felt especially strong this year. A Christmas Eve Bills game, drinks with other expatriate friends at favorite hometown haunts, and yes, the prospect of a little lake effect snow carried me home on the drive from New Haven to Buffalo.

Those hopes were dashed, however, when hurricane force winds met a lake effect storm that more than just dropping a few feet of snow on the ground made otherwise challenging travel conditions downright deadly. Christmas would be small again this year. My parents and I quickly exhausted our muted holiday spirit, and my boredom eventually led me to the shelves in my childhood bedroom, and more specifically to my senior high school yearbook. I've opened that book a few times since 2015, but not recently. And so snowed in on Christmas, I was not just frustrated, but in fact deeply outraged with my younger self for picking the most try hard senior quote of all time from President Theodore Roosevelt, Harvard class of 1880. The quote goes, "Far and away, the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing." What a loser. Does this kid have any friends?

After a few deep breaths, the American historian in me contextualized the quote in the canon of self-help rhetoric that has deluded too many of our fellow citizens in the past and today into believing that work and money are reflective of internal worth. Indeed, having grown up in the Rust Belt and devoted my academic research to understanding the transformation of post-industrial America, I especially bristle at such continued devotion to the Protestant ethic, which has been used all too often to pathologize and condemn communities where work disappears.

But my training as a historian has also taught me how to read against the grain to defamiliarize and challenge old thinking in order to grow. And in that spirit, while I can't remotely claim that my younger self had this reading of President Roosevelt in mind, I'd like to offer a different perspective on work worth doing informed by the deep spiritual wisdom passed down to us through the prophet Isaiah.

In my chosen text for this morning, Isaiah indicts the Israelites for misinterpreting god's will around fasting. The Israelites go through all the motions, humbling themselves and holding each other to account for breaking the rules, and yet find a God who is dissatisfied. The work worth doing, Isaiah tells God's people, is not the performative ritual of religiosity. It's not about prostration and self-denial, and neither is it about accumulation and individual righteousness. Rather, God's instructions are unequivocal. Go walk in the world broken as it is and repair the breach, offering what you can of

yourselves to all those whom you encounter instead of participating in the collective fast that has for too long accorded different value to different lives.

What if we took God and Isaiah at their word? What would it mean for Harvard and Yale to start sharing their bread with the hungry and to stop hiding themselves from their own kin? I can't help but imagine what our world will look like when my alma maters decide they have collected enough bread for themselves such that they can start sharing it again when they and their faculties boldly stand up for their colleagues around the country who live in a state of fear as curricula and intellectual freedom become canon fodder in the latest culture wars. And when they supplement rhetorical gestures toward inclusion with the reparative and redistributive material task of loosing the bonds of injustice.

How much better will our campuses and our communities be when the elite institutions, which we all revere, choose to reverse the prevailing wins of hollowed out educational missions, narrowed student aspirations and provincial thinking about the many who will never walk through their gates? Most importantly, what do we need to do individually and collectively in order to bring that world into existence. To be proud of our institutions, not in spite of themselves, but because of themselves?

The lot of us assembled in this chapel today and on this campus in Cambridge and on my current campus in New Haven have far greater access to the levers of change than any of us ever cared to admit to ourselves, no less publicly acknowledge. And that is good news if we seize it, my brothers and sisters, because breaches abound and they are not hard to spot. Indeed, in places like this one, they are all around us. So while I've learned in the past eight years that life has far better prizes to offer than work, I have also learned that we have work to do. We have work worth doing to do. And so the only question that remains is this, where will you begin? Let the church say amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise in body or spirit for the Lord's prayer. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy kingdom 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 to temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen. And please join in our closing hymn, Christ is Alive, Let Christians Sing, number 169.

Congregation/Choir:
(singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

Christ has no hands in this world but your hands and no voice in this world but your voice. So may our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love today and all days. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.