

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. As a reminder, this evening at 5:15, we're going to have the last in our Noble Lecture series for the year with Professor Emmanuel Katongole of Duke, and we'd love to have you join us here tonight. Please rise, embody your spirit for our responsive Psalm reading, which is number 103 in your black psalter.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, all my being, His holy name."

Congregation:

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all of His bounties."

Elizabeth Propst:

"He forgives all your sins, heals all your diseases."

Congregation:

"He redeems your life from the Pit, surrounds you with steadfast love and His mercy."

Elizabeth Propst:

"The Lord executes righteous acts and judgements for all who are wronged."

Congregation:

"He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the children of Israel."

Elizabeth Propst:

"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love."

Congregation:

"He will not contend forever, or nurse His anger for all time."

Elizabeth Propst:

"He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor has He requited us according to our iniquities."

Congregation:

"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love to those who fear Him."

Elizabeth Propst:

"As east is far from west, so far has He removed our sins from us."

Choir:

(Singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

This is from the first chapter of the First Letter to the Corinthians, verse 19 and 20. "For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" So, I wasn't sure what to talk about this morning. I'm not sure how I feel about graduating college. It seems like kind of an arbitrary rite of passage. But if I learned nothing else from a degree in English and religion, it is that just because something seems arbitrary does not mean that it is meaningless.

And when I was thinking about what I should say today, I tried to be original, but at the end of it, I think I'm just going to have to talk about people, and how special people are, because I think that's what has made this place meaningful for me, it's what has made my five years here so special. I know a lot of very, very cool people who are graduating this spring, who I've seen over the last years here present research to be United Nations, and produce and perform wholly original musicals, and patent medical procedures. I've seen seniors in this class care for each other among deep, deep experiences of loss. Some of them dance, and paint, and sing, and write books, and poetry, and run marathons, and hike very, very long distances. And they speak lots of languages, and they build these little robots that do little robot things and discover asteroids. And some of them do something called quantum computing. Some of them, not all, can do long division.

And also, I'm feeling really grateful at this juncture in my life for all of the cool people I know who are not college seniors, who also do apparently impossible things, like working exhausting jobs, and raising children, and being a good person in a difficult world. And I just look around me and I see a lot of people doing a lot of things with care, and passion, and commitment. A lot of people trying to be good to each other, a lot of things that I think are probably miracles. This year, my grandma learned how to use an iPad. When she was born, FDR was president. Imagine trying to explain an iPad to Franklin Delano Roosevelt? You couldn't, he would be too confused.

And so at the end of the day, how I'm thinking about what it means to graduate is maybe the lesson that you can take away from almost any juncture of life, which is that the [inaudible 00:11:12] world is both better and worse than we think it is. And at the end of the day, we've just got to commit to loving each other, and following through on that commitment, and not wasting any more time writing or thinking about it, and just get down to business. But I figured, by way of thinking through this a bit more today, that I would just do what has served me well throughout the entirety of my academic career, and subject you guys to some rambling nonsense that I wrote at about three o'clock in the morning.

I work as an overnight supervisor at Y2Y, the youth shelter across the street in the basement of the church, our neighbors over there. And a week ago, I had my last shift. And we're graduating a lot of seniors this year, probably 20 seniors on our staff, who I've spent some of the most meaningful, meaningful moments of the time I've had here at Harvard with those people. And so, depending on your perspective, either very, very late Friday night, or very, very late Saturday morning of last week, or very, very early Saturday morning of last week, I was on shift, I was sitting out in the space, you turn all the lights off at night, and if you've never been there before, it's this kind of enormous basement room with tall ceilings. And so it's this big, dark cavern and all the lights are off. And it was lit just by the dull, red glow of the exit sign.

And I was staring into the void and thinking about what it means to graduate college. And I was asking myself how, "Who was I five years ago? How have we all changed? How are these relationships that we've all built going to change, now that we're moving out into the world? Who am I going to lose touch with? Who have I already spoken to for the last time, not knowing that that was the last time I would be with them?" And then I thought, "I bet I could make a joke out of this." Because at Y2Y, we do something called shift notes, where, at the end of every shift, we send out a little form that is emailed to everybody on staff summarizing just how the shift went. And most of it's pretty cut-and-dry, and boring. We have a section to write down the supplies that we run out of, and the policies and consequences we had to enforce.

And there's one part right at the very end where we get to be funny and avant-garde, if we so wish, called pluses and deltas, which is like this little section right at the end of notes, where we... Builds community by having a little fun by going over what were the pros and cons of the shift were. And it's not a competition to see who can write the funniest pluses and deltas, but I think it's a competition. And normally, it's just something like "Shift plus, guests enjoyed dinner. Shift delta, someone peed in the trashcan again, frowny face." And so, I had my moment of existential angst there last week, thinking about my last shift with these people I loved as a member of the undergrad community. And I decided to get a headstart on writing our shift's deltas and pluses. And I was trying to be funny and self-parodic. And then I looked at it later and I was like, "Darn, I think I actually meant this." Which is embarrassing. But I thought I would just read those to you guys today.

"Shift Delta. All things must come to an end. We can never be in the present moment what we were in the past, or be in the future what we are in the present. Life is a chaotic and bewildering journey through a world whose only constant is change. Shift plus, life's constant change is as hopeful as it is terrifying. Even though this group of people will never be together in the same place and in the same way ever again, we will find each other in new places and new ways, moving into spaces both as individuals and as a community that surpassed the limited capacity of our present imagination. The inevitable difficulties and failures of the future cannot change the joy of what we have already accomplished together, nor is the future condemned only to relive the patterns established by the past."

"We are aspiring towards a wholeness of being that can never be fully realized, not because of our frailty and limitation, but because that being's integrity is tied up in our choice to aspire towards something we know we will never reach. The certainty of change is also the certainty that every moment carries the possibility of making ourselves anew." And then, six hours later, I added a postscript right before we emailed out the notes to staff. I'm not really sure what a prayer is, but I'm pretty sure this is a prayer, and I wrote, "Shift plus number two, our morning volunteer, Aidan, made a pancake, and it had a smiley face on it, and that was pretty cool." Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Will you please rise and join me in the words of 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, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen."

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."

Elizabeth Propst:

Please join in our concluding hymn, When Morning Gilds the Skies, number 44 in your crimson hymnal.

Congregation:

(Singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

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

Congregation:

Amen.