

Courtney Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Courtney Godwin:

Welcome to morning prayers. Today, we continue with our senior talks with Monica Chang of Kirkland House. Welcome, Monica. Will you please rise as you are able, and join me in our responsive reading, Psalm 117?

Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol Him, all you peoples.

Congregation:

For great is His steadfast love toward us; the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the Lord.

Courtney Godwin:

You may be seated.

Choir:

(singing)

Monica Chang:

An excerpt from the song, Better Together, by Jack Johnson. Love is the answer, at least for most of the questions in my heart, like why are we here? And where do we go? And how come it's so hard? It's not always easy and sometimes life can be deceiving. I'll tell you one thing, it's always better when we're together.

As I was preparing for this talk, I found myself reflecting on what I've learned in my four years here at Harvard. What has made this a truly transformative experience, as Dean Khurana claims he puts it? To quote Jack Johnson, I think I've learned that love is the answer to most of the questions of my heart, and Memorial Church has been a part of that learning.

When I tell my friends that I go to Memorial Church every Sunday, sometimes even multiple time a week, even though I'm not Christian, I sometimes get a physical look. I get it. An irreligious church goer does seem like a bit of an oxymoron. I usually try, somewhat ineffectually, to explain why I choose to come here week after week. I come for UChoir's staggeringly beautiful choral music. Their voices transporting me to the indescribable place of oneness and beauty. I come for David's incredible organ playing, to feel his moving beautiful music vibrate into my bones. I come for the soothing, healing nature of ritual and of being in community.

But perhaps, even more than all that, I come to listen to Matt Potts's sermons, and to be reminded, week after week, of how to love. How to love more fully, and radically, and boundlessly. Once, after one of the first Sunday services I attended, I asked Matt how he defined love, since it was a word used so frequently in his sermons? After a moment of thoughtful contemplation he said, "To love is to intend an act for the fruition of another." Matt told me that the kind of love he preached about, God's love, was not the warm fuzzy affectionate feeling that we might typically associate with the word. It was a kind of

love that could exist alongside righteous anger. After all, to act for the fruition of another could very well be holding them accountable for their harmful behavior, without seeking to humiliate or degrade. It was a kind of love that reached all those we typically deem other, because we find them too different, or too far away, or too deplorable. It was a kind of love that emphasized action as well as intent.

I'm going to pull a classic Matt Potts here, and turn to some etymology. As I thought about love this year, I found myself reading more and more of Martin Luther King, Jr's speeches and writings. At the center of his work is an epic of love. King often turns to the Greek words for love to illuminate the words' multi-layered meanings. In Greek, eros refers to romantic love. Philia refers to a super cool affectionate love of friends. And finally, there is agape. Agape love, the kind of love that came most often in books, means nothing sentimental or affectionate. It is what King calls understanding creative redeeming good will for all men. The love of God operating in the human heart.

This theme of agape love is also raised in my exploration of the Buddhist traditions here. Especially in the compassionate figure of the bodhisattva. What do the words say to me? Buddha put it for the benefit of all sentient beings, rooted in a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings. The bodhisattva experiences another's suffering as their own by seeing no stranger. In other words, they follow the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself. What would it really mean to love our neighbors as if they were ourselves? I thought about this question often this past year. In fact, I would say that in a way, my senior thesis centers on it.

Last fall, every week, I would take the number one bus from Harvard down this line, until I got to the Mass. and Cass area. An area of Boston that has grown to a large unhoused community, and is also the epicenter of the nation's opium crisis. In the space of 30 minutes, I watched the landscape outside my bus window transform from stately brick, to gleaming skyscrapers, to dilapidated warehouses. To see the drastic contrast between my comfortable dining hall, dorm room existence, and the harsh living conditions of my unhoused neighbors within just a 30 minute bus ride away was psychologically unsettling and painful.

For my thesis, I interviewed two dozen people living on the street, in traditional housing, as well as the front line staff who serves them daily. Over hours of conversation, I learned how living in the Mass. and Cass area is both dehumanizing and humanizing at the same time. Informally excluded from the traditional system, and restricted to this industrial no man's land away from the rich neighborhoods of Boston, people talked about really less than human, due to their harsh violent living conditions, and their cruel and stigmatizing treatment by broader society.

At the same time, people talked about ways in which they cared for each other. Reversing overdoses, sharing food, and drugs, and clothes. Providing a shoulder to cry on. Standing up for each other. They talked about how compassionate front line staff treated them with love and respect. Getting to know them as individuals, encouraging them through hard times, recognizing their talent and intelligence. Through both intention and action, the people at Mass. and Cass find ways to love each other. And through that love, they experience a sense of humanity in these inhumane conditions. I was deeply moved by what I saw as agape love and compassion.

Well what do these dynamics say about the rest of our society? About us. About our commitment to love thy neighbor as thyself. Would we allow ourselves, our children, our loved ones, to sleep outside in the freezing Boston winters? To be invizibilized and forgotten? To be treated with contempt? To die unnoticed and ungrieved? How might we, adding to the lovelessness of our society, and move towards the agape love modeled by the unhoused speakers I interviewed? Until the prejudices of every day people in broader society shift, people who use drugs, and people experiencing homelessness, will continue to exist at the margins of this country. What is needed, is a cultural shift. A social movement

that embraces love for these members of our community. Will we embrace agape love through intention and action? I am hopeful that we can and we will.

Love is the answer to most of the questions of my heart. In college, I experienced eros. I've been lucky enough to fall in love. I've experienced philia through a super cool affection, love of friends, Some of whom I can spot in the audiences today. And I think I am beginning to understand agape. I still fall short every single day, but I am trying, and I am learning.

As I move into this next chapter of my life, I hope to take inspiration from our very own Matt Potts. In a recent Gazette poll, Matt says that his driving question is, did I love people today? Did I help them lean more loving? That is the question that I hope to ask myself every day for the rest of my life. Did I love people today? And did I help them be more loving? Love in the vague agape sense is the word. Will you pray with me?

May the love that we feel for those closest to us expand outwards, and come into our interactions with every living being. And to quote Martin Luther King Jr., "May we each go away from this meeting with a restless determination to make the ideal of brotherhood a reality in this nation and all over the world." Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Courtney Godwin:

Please rise in body or spirit for the Lord's Prayer.

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.

Courtney Godwin:

Please join in singing our final hymn, number 27, We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing, and just the first verse this morning.

Congregation/Choir:
(singing)

Courtney Godwin:

As we leave this place today, may we keep the question of how we might end the lovelessness of our world, on our hearts. May we act for the flourishing of one another, and may we remember that we are always better together. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.