

Anna Burnham:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Anna Burnham:

And welcome to Morning Prayers at Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton psalter book, Psalm 125, found on page 63. Psalm 125. Please stand as you are able, to read responsibly by the whole verse.

They who trust in God are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but stands fast forever.

Congregation:

The hills stand about Jerusalem; so does the Lord stand round about his people, from this time forth for evermore.

Anna Burnham:

The scepter of the wicked shall not hold sway over the land allotted to the just, so that the just shall not put their hands to evil.

Congregation:

Show your goodness, O God, to those who are good, and to those who are true of heart.

Anna Burnham:

As for those who turn aside to crooked ways, God will lead them away with the evildoers; but peace be upon Israel.

(singing)

Will Sutton:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Will Sutton:

From Romans 12. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

When I was little, my dad and I shared a hymnal. On Sundays, I stood beside him in the church pew, my brown Old Navy polo shirt tucked into corduroy slacks. My dad would hunch over a bit, so he could hold the book low enough for me to follow along with the words. He was so close to my ear, I could hear every word he sang. It was like he was singing to me. And y'all, he was not good.

To be fair, he wasn't the only one. As a collective, St. John's the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts was a mixed bag. We had the old school Episcopalians who arrived at mass an hour early to take their customary spots. These front row fixtures include one loud and proud tone-deaf tenor, a gaggle of breathy altos, donning church hats and austere broaches, and a smattering of surprisingly disciplined sopranos.

Behind this constant roster sat whoever else made it to mass. Young parents, desperately trying to turn the hymn into a lullaby to soothe their crying baby. Kids in sweaty soccer shin guards, who bellowed confidently. And a smattering of ex Bostonians whose accents jumped out while singing, We Three Kings of Orient Are.

We were a ragtag crew, but we had our hits. I have fond memories of singing hymn number 686, Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing, just about every other week from 2010 to 2015. I still love that soaring third verse, Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be. Let Thy goodness like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee.

A couple weeks ago in my dorm room, I searched for number 686 on Spotify, and I discovered that if you look up just about any hymn on Spotify, most of the recordings are by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Let me tell you, those Mormons know their stuff. They sing in gorgeous four-part harmonies. They take breaths quietly and at opportune times. Their tempos are consistent. They crescendo when they're supposed to. Their disembodied voices build towards glowing eruptions of praiseful sound. It's not my cup of tea. And that's nothing against the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, nor the equally beautiful new choir that's singing here this morning. But when I searched up that hymn on Spotify, I was looking for a little memory of that mess of a choir at St. John's. The sound, the feel. Heck, even the smell of it. I was longing for a little piece of that imperfection.

The last time I went to church was in October for a funeral. A good family friend and church member had taken his own life. The opening hymn was number 662, Abide with Me. The organ plunked along, and my dad, beside me in his black suit, did his best to sing. We all did. Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide. And I realized, through my grief, that there was nowhere else I'd rather be. And it wasn't the communion wafers, or the praying, or the vaulted ceiling. It wasn't even God. Not really. It was the feeling of being among this mass of us. A bunch of non singers raising our voices in non unison, a patchwork circle of sound erupting from a group of people doing our darnedest to make music. To me, this is community.

When I quote, as I often do, Audre Lorde, who says, "Without community there is no liberation.", I think of our hymns. I think of my poor dad, and the sweaty soccer kids, and the tone-deaf tenor in the front pew. I think of imperfect people in a grand room making bad music. There's holiness in that. Thank you.

Anna Burnham:

Please stand as you are able for prayer.

God of song, God of hymns, God of offbeat clapping and shaky high notes. To be people together singing the songs of life is to be imperfect. Help us remember that it is in that imperfection that we might find what it means to be in community, to seek the divine, to love each other most fully. Amen.

Will Sutton:

Amen.

Anna Burnham:

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

Anna Burnham:

Together, let us sing the hymn, Judge Eternal, Throned in Splendor, number 363, found in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

(singing)

Go forth into the day in peace. Hold fast to that which is good. May the love of God draw us closer to God and to each other, today and every day. And together, let us say amen.

Congregation:

Amen.