

Stef Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Stef Grossano:

Welcome to Morning Prayers at Appleton Chapel. Today's speaker will be Ellie Ashby, Harvard College Class of 2024. Today's service will begin with responsive reading from the Black Appleton Salter book. Please rise in body or spirit as we read Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Congregation:

He maketh me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters.

Stef Grossano:

He restored my soul. He leads me in straight paths for his name's sake.

Congregation:

Yeah, though I walk the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Stef Grossano:

Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou has anointed my head with oil. My cup runneth over.

Congregation:

Surely, goodness and mercies shall follow me, all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord for ever.

Stef Grossano:

Please be seated.

Choir:

(Singing).

Stef Grossano:

Good morning, everyone.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Ellie Ashby:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Hi.

Ellie Ashby:

I would like to start off today with a brief reading from Ecclesiastes 8:15. "So I commend the enjoyment of life because there's nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad, then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun." So Ecclesiastes is my favorite book of the Bible. I feel like I always get a lot of stares when I say this. It's not a very happy or a flipping book. I mean the beginning of the book, chapter one, verse one is meaningless, meaningless says the teacher. Utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless.

So it makes the verse, I just read the statement about enjoying life, eating and drinking and being glad makes it feel incredibly out of place. But it is exactly this confusion, this contradiction that I really enjoy, a lament that encourages joy within the grief. It's a very strange thing. I think it would also help to tell another story. So I remember the day March 1st, 2009, as if it was yesterday. Snow fell gently over the city of Atlanta. I was in second grade, and my younger sisters and I built a snowman so large that our dad had to pick up the giant balls of snow that we had made and he had to lift them up in order to construct the snowman because we were not tall enough to do so. I remember a snowball fight with the entire neighborhood, and I remember that the snowman we made lasted for weeks and it tilted over as time went on to a 45-degree angle before it finally collapsed to the ground.

The day was also the day that I took my first communion. Now, I don't remember anything about that. I don't remember talking to the pastor of my church about my spiritual journey or even what I thought about the character of Jesus or God. I have a vague memory of my parents telling me it was the right thing to do at the age of seven. It was the right thing to do, so I failed to recall if I had any feeling of joy or acceptance. Any understanding of what I was stepping into completely alluded me. But I do remember the snow. I remember pushing my sister down the hill in our backyard on a makeshift sled. But the building, the church where I was supposed to find some semblance of religious clarity failed me. What did not fail me, however, was the spiritual joy and elation and connection to the earth that I found within the snow.

For many, the very nature of the day of my first communion is contradictory, much like the strange dual nature of Ecclesiastes, of a depressing book, being the one that I find most authentic, a book that holds grief and joy simultaneously, the story of my first communion throws a wrench into our collective conception of what a personal testimony of faith even is. Can it be found outside, perhaps due to the absence of the church? Can it be found within the community of the world?

I find this same fascinating contradiction within the space that we're actually in right now. Memorial Church became a little bit of an obsession of mine after I visited with a class last semester. We stared at the Golden Eagle and the Golden Cross outside in the sanctuary, and we stood and saw all the names of the patriots who had given their lives in World War I and II, and we tried to wrap our mind around a place that seemed to kind of merge Christian and American identities.

It was a remnant of this muscular Christianity that took over post World War I, and it was a space that I didn't really find any comfort in and actually was quite uncomfortable in. Yet, as I wrote in a previous piece regarding this space, there was also something enrapturing about the relinquishing of power, of understanding in the face of unimaginable violence, in the face of war, in memorializing those who died in a church. Mankind seems to say this tragedy is not something that can be understood, and so we choose to honor that sacrifice by falling to our knees. Ecclesiastes, the story of my own spirituality, Memorial Church. All of these spaces, scriptural, personal and physical, en gender and intense

discomfort, a seemingly severe illogicality that makes you want to say, but one of these must be the truth. One of these two sides must win. We cannot possibly hold both at the same time.

But it is exactly that discomfort, that grating] sound in your skull that I strangely love. I love that you have to sit and think in the contradiction of lamentation and celebration in the case of Ecclesiastes, that you have to stew within this strange liminal space of Memorial Church and that you must hold my complex, unorthodox at times, sociological fascination of and discomfort with the conception of faith and what it means to me. I find clarity, a strange and lasting peace within these contradictory spaces, and I encourage others to do the same.

Thank you.

Stef Grossano:

Please rise in body or spirit, and let us pray. God, beyond all dualities, help us to know that you are with us in both our joy and our sorrow. In the moments that are meaningful and the moments that are meaningless in our moments of clarity and our moments of confusion. You are the middle path. Let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Congregation:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thy is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Stef Grossano:

And let us sing together hymn 204 in you black Appleton Psalter.

Chior:

(Singing).

Stef Grossano:

Loving God, as we go into this day, let us remember that is in your goodness that we were born into this world, it is by your grace that You have kept us all the day long even until this every hour. It is by your love that we are being made whole. Go in peace. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.