

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. We're excited to have Stef Grossano with us this morning, a seminarian here in this church and a third year Master of Divinity candidate at Harvard Divinity School. Please rise and embody your spirit and join in our responsive psalm, which is number 27 in your black psalter. "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?"

Congregation:

"When evildoers assail, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall."

Elizabeth Propst:

"Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear, the war arise against me, yet I will be confident."

Congregation:

"One thing I ask the Lord, that I will seek after that I may well dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life. To be behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple."

Elizabeth Propst:

"For He will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble, He will conceal me under the cover of His tent. He will set me high upon a rock."

Congregation:

Give me not up to the will of my adversaries: for false witness have risen against me. and they breathe out violence.

Elizabeth Propst:

"I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

Congregation:

"Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage. Yea wait for the Lord." (Singing).

Stef Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Stef Grossano:

This is a reading from Mary Oliver, her poem. Wild Geese. "You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for 100 miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile, the world goes on. Meanwhile, the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers. Meanwhile, the wild geese high in the clear blue air are heading home again. Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like wild geese, harsh and exciting, over and over, announcing your place in the family of things."

Last year I was a student chaplain at a local hospital. When I would share this with others, I could feel the curiosity in their eyes as they would ask, "What is that like?" My answers seem to offer more confusion than elucidation. I would say, "Chaplaincy is confronting." Their brows would furrow, and they would clarify, "You mean the patients are confrontational?" And I would say, "No. I mean, chaplaincy confronts you [inaudible 00:10:18]." It confronted me with my desire to be perfect and the shame that drives it. Before spiritual care visits, I would try to forecast what might be happening for a patient. I would try to imagine what I would say or how I would pray in a given situation. Part of offering spiritual care is clairvoyance.

In those moments of rumination, my body did not feel like a soft animal as Mary Oliver says. It felt like a stiff board thick with the tension of the unknown. Maybe, I hoped, that if I could anticipate what was going to happen, then I'd be less likely to mess up and more likely to be good. You see the desire to be perfect and even sometimes the desire to be good is really the desire to escape the pain of shame, judgment, and blame, sometimes from other people and sometimes from ourselves.

One Saturday afternoon, a staff chaplain asked me to wait with a woman and her daughter who was dying. We were waiting for the Catholic priest to arrive to administer last rights. When I entered the room, the daughter was clutching rosary beads with her one hand and caressing her mother's leg with the other, staring at the intubation tube that was helping her mother breathe. We talked about her mother's life, her mother's faith. We prayed and we waited.

At one point, the daughter turned to me and said, "You have a hard job." To her I said, "It's a privilege to be with you." But internally, I was asking myself self critically, what did I do to make my job look so arduous? If I was making it look hard, then I must be doing something wrong. Perfectionism turns hardship into a personal failing, into the problem of not being good enough, instead of an experience of our intrinsic human vulnerability. In reality, there was no way that being in that room would not be difficult. By making an observation about me, the daughter had one more way of naming that reality, of naming her reality, which is really our reality of human frailty and fallibility.

Throughout this year, learning to chaplain, I had to ask myself, where does this come from? This desire to be perfect? And it comes from a lot of places, but I think one of those places is Christian theologies that make our worthiness, our salvation, dependent upon our goodness. It comes from theologies that emphasize the emulation of God's perfection more than God's grace, God's mercy, and God's compassion. I think it's compassion that provides some antidote to this perfectionist grasping. I'll tell you one more story to illustrate this.

Another Saturday I was visiting with a patient who was struggling with the way that cancer had changed her body, the weight she had gained, the hair she had lost, the energy she didn't have. She said to me, "I feel disgusted with my body." I felt her pain so viscerally, and I replied, "I believe all bodies are good

bodies regardless of their health or their size." And she said to me, point-blank, "I don't believe that." Her directness was like a mirror forcing me to reflect on what I had said and why. But this time, I was asking myself that question with curiosity and not with self-blame. I realized that I replied as I did because I struggled with body image too. Her pain had touched my pain. "Tell me about despair. Yours," Mary Oliver says. "And I will tell you mine."

When I could be compassionate with myself and even the mistake that I made in responding the way that I did, I had more capacity to offer her compassion too. Eventually, I said, "It sounds really uncomfortable to be in your body right now." This patient did not need to be told that she was good. She needed her pain to be seen. So I want to invite us this morning to wonder together who are we if we are not good? And where would we go if we are not walking on our knees for 100 miles through the desert repenting? I don't ask these questions in a spirit of nihilism or hedonism or moral relativism. I ask these questions wondering if there's something other than more than good that we might want to be, like compassionate or authentic or brave. And when we get there to this, more than other than good place, will we know that we still belong, that we are still loved, that as Mary Oliver says, "We still have a place in the family of things?" Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Heavenly One, too often we take you to be the ideal of which we fall short. Instead of the one who reminds us over and over again, that even amidst our brokenness, we are entirely beloved. Remind us that you abide with us in failure as much as in victory. Show us how to be merciful to ourselves as you are perfectly merciful. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise, embody your spirit for 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 trespassed 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.

Congregation:

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Elizabeth Propst:

Please join in our closing hymn number four in your crimson hymnal. (Singing).

Christ has no hands in this world but yours. No voice but yours. May our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love, today and always, amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

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