

Stef Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

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Stef Grossano:

And welcome to morning prayers at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Mauricio Bruce, Harvard Divinity School class of 2024. Our service will begin with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton Psalter book. So I invite you to rise in body or spirit as we read Psalm 100, responsively by whole verse.

May all land be joyful before you, oh God, serve you with gladness and come before your presence with a song.

Congregation:

For we know that you are God, you yourself have made us, we are yours. We are the people, the sheath of your passion.

Stef Grossano:

We shall enter your gates with thanksgiving, go into your courts with praise, give thanks to you, and call upon your name.

Congregation:

For you are life, you are mercies everlasting, your faithfulness endures from age to age.

Mauricio Bruce:

I died this summer. I am still alive, and I discovered something I have known theoretically, but now I've lived and I want to explore that with you today. Before that though, in order for you to understand what I want to say, I want to take you back to when I was about to turn 18. I grew up in a conservative and religious family. I was raised Catholic, but because I'm queer, I didn't really feel comfortable with religion back then. It was the world I was embedded in, but there was always a fear deep in me that if I let myself be fully me, the world, my world, would end. So a few weeks before I turned 18, a family member read my journal, found out I was gay and wanted to have a conversation. The reading of that journal brought about two things. One, I felt relieved to have that secret pulled out. I was finally out in the world and it hadn't exploded.

But two, I also felt scared as to what that meant. How was my life changing or how had my life changed forever? Two weeks later, my appendix burst, as if something in me couldn't handle all the questions in my head. It burst out before I was done digesting, my queerness being laid bare. What came was a month's worth in the hospital. There were small deaths that happened there. My trust died. My sense of safety died. The world was dangerous. I had to walk carefully. If I wanted to stay here, I needed to learn to navigate all these intersections. Believed me, the intersection of queerness and catholicism, at least in my native Costa Rica, in my family and in me, were complicated ones, lots of dangerous traffic. So I ran away as fast as I could.

I left for college in the United States, vowing in my mind never to turn back. I was going to build a safe world for myself, whatever it took. I was going to find a place where I could be me, where hopefully I could still have some kind of contact with the mystery, because even though I had been raised Catholic and I didn't believe in any of that lore, there was a part of me, a magical part, that never stopped believing that there was something bigger than me. How could I? In the hospital, I had seen things. I'd heard things in my dreams. There were clear callings that I couldn't ignore. But what were they and what were they calling me to do? So back to this summer, I began the summer thinking there's an old scar on my chest right over my heart. It's been there since I was about 19 or 20.

So why don't I get that removed? It was a minor procedure, something more aesthetic than anything. I'd never tried to get that scar removed. But for some reason, this summer was the moment when that wanted to happen. A couple of weeks later, while I was still healing from that, I had an intestinal stroke. My insides were dying, at least a part of them according to the doctor. Surgery needed to be immediate. He was going to try and save my life and leave me with as few side effects and consequences as possible. When the surgery was done, he met me in the ICU. He was curious, he said. "The piece of intestine that died, the piece I removed was where your appendix used to be. Oh, and by the way, while I was in there, I took out your old scars, I gave you some nicer ones."

So this is where I wanted to arrive with all of you today so that we can explore what I'm thinking or seeing. I had three old physical scars removed this summer. My chest or my heart scar, my interior appendix scar, and my exterior stomach scars, all of which came from when I was 18 or 19 years old. How many emotional or spiritual scars were removed this summer? I don't know if I can count or understand those, but I can say that in a way, this summer's death was perhaps more of a birth. My husband stood by my side and filled out my paperwork. My mother held his hand. A sense of pride and safety were born. I was being held and taken care of. I find myself trusting the process, trusting the world, and trusting my body. I guess what I'm trying to point out or tie together is that what started when I was 18 was all of a sudden unbeknownst to me, coming to an end. There was an old story there about me, about my scars and about my identity, about what I had to go through to find it.

It was a story of my singular pain. It was an expected story about how hard life is and how much we have to go through to find ourselves. It was what you would expect me to stand here and talk about. I'm not sure if this is how life works, if this is how the mystery works, but it seems to me like these two moments in my life are now inextricably tied together. I had died at 18 and was now being reborn. There was a cycle, a story in my life that was ending and there was room for something new to be born. At 18, no part of me could have ever imagined standing in a church and talking about being queer. That was a forbidden story. But today, nothing seems more important. I talk about being queer, not as a story of shame, of pain, or of death, but it's a story of hope, of love, and of possibility.

It's a story of divinity and the way it is always leading us toward a fuller, healthier, more complete version of ourselves. And yet, I think if we don't make these stories conscious, if we don't talk about them and point them out to ourselves, they would just go down in my life as random events. If I don't honor and sit with these parts of myself, they'll just fade into the everyday and won't lend me their power to build and birth a new me. In life, we are surrounded by births and deaths. In the West, I think we're really bad at death. We try our hardest not to let things die. Friendships, old parts of ourselves, or even old wounds. The power in recognizing our own deaths and the parts of us that are leaving is the part that also lets new parts of us emerge and be born.

It makes room for us to grow into bigger, more complete selves, and this cycle takes time. Didn't happen immediately or six months after my first surgery. My body, my spirit, myself, enacted a cycle that took years. We can't push ourselves to end our cycle or to reach a certain destination, but our role is to pay attention, to speak out, and to make our journey a conscious one. The cycles of my life as I'm

recognizing and seeing them unhook me from the old stories that used to define me and bring the possibilities of new ones. Old scars are removed physically, yes, but also spiritually, that this is always and has always been a possibility that is available to us is a miracle. Trauma does not have to be forever. We are ever-changing, constantly healing parts of the great mystery. And if we can see that light in the darkness, then we know that the possibilities of our life are endless. Thank you.

Stef Grossano:

Please rise and embody your spirit and let us pray. Loving God, we come to you with our scars, knowing that you bore scars, too, knowing that just as you have experienced pain, you are also the bringer of healing. God of all consolation, be with us on our journey from scars to new life, knowing that the things that we let die are also a portal to new life. And as we write the story on this journey, help us to remember our belovedness, the love that you have had for us since the beginning of time. And help us to know that every part of us, especially our queerness, is loved by you.

And together let us pray as Jesus taught us, Our Father who are heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it's 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, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen. Let us now sing hymn 347 in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

As we go into this day, let us remember that in the goodness of God, we were born into this world. By the grace of God, we have been kept all the day long, even unto this very hour. And by the love of God, we are being made whole. Go in peace. Amen.