

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome and welcome back to our daily service of morning prayers here in the Appleton Chapel of our Memorial Church. Daily prayers have been said at Harvard since its founding in 1636, and we are delighted to resume that practice this morning. We are especially delighted to welcome as our speaker this morning, the 31st president of Harvard University, Alan Garber.

I invite you please to rise now and join me in saying our responsorial psalm, which is Number 16 in your black psalter.

Preserve me, oh God, for in thee do I put my trust.

Congregation:

Oh, my soul. Thou hast said unto the Lord, "Thou art my Lord. My goodness extendeth not to thee."

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight.

Congregation:

Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god. Their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup. Thou maintainest my lot.

Congregation:

The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places. Yea, I have a goodly heritage.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

I will bless the Lord, who hath given me counsel. My reins also instruct me in the night seasons.

Congregation:

I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Therefore, my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth. My flesh also shall rest in hope.

Congregation:

For thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell. Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

(singing)

Alan Garber:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Alan Garber:

"Find yourself a teacher, win yourself a friend, and be one who judges everyone by giving them the benefit of the doubt."

These Talmudic words are part of a compendium called Pirkei Avot, or "Sayings of the Fathers," that are traditionally read on the Sabbath day. Today, on the first day of classes of the fall semester, you do not need to be a student to benefit from their insight. Find yourself a teacher. Seek out people whose experiences, skills, and perspectives are different from your own. And whose knowledge and wisdom often exceed yours. Win yourself a friend. Friendship is a reciprocal relationship. Not only must you find the friend, but you must earn the friendship by being a friend, offering companionship, empathy, concern, support, and trustworthiness.

Be one who judges everyone by giving them the benefit of the doubt. We're all too adept at recognizing the flaws of our antagonists and even of our friends. It's tempting to interpret the actions of others in the worst possible light. It is better for all of us to do the opposite. Consciously striving to judge others in the best possible light, in the words of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, shows our true respect for them. People who judge in this way will be better people themselves and will more likely evoke the best possible behavior from others. How should we interpret these words at a tumultuous time like this one?

Yesterday, many of us attended a particularly beautiful convocation for the first-year undergraduates. The enthusiasm and the optimism of the new students uplifted us all as we sensed the seemingly limitless possibilities ahead. And judging from the new students I met with, openness to hearing and benefiting from the diverse views of a diverse group of people.

Yet we also know that this fall is not likely to be calm. With memories of the spring still fresh, we expect that there will be debate and argument. There will be dissent and protest. There will no doubt be hard feelings and hurt feelings among us. If you believe the headlines, and last month was awash in them, those of us who are fortunate enough to be a part of universities have no choice but to brace ourselves. What a bleak notion that is at an institution such as this one. As a place to find a teacher and to win a friend, it is hard to imagine a better environment than ours. This is one of the world's finest centers of learning and teaching, with some of the world's greatest scholars and researchers, with some of the world's most challenging issues and most complex problems in our sights.

Here we are, peering into the unknown, teetering on the verge of discovery, ushering in a new era of insight. Here we are, pushing the limits of understanding, pursuing genuine excellence in every domain, and making ourselves, our university, and the world better. Here we are, blessed with resources beyond many of our wildest dreams. Laboratories laden with the most advanced equipment. Libraries and museums brimming with collections that would take a lifetime or more to fully explore. Breathtaking architecture, beautiful landscapes, herbaria... Notice, plural... As well as an arboretum in Boston, a forest in Petertown, a garden in our nation's capital, a villa in Florence. All of the many places on our campus and beyond where we feel enlarged by association. All of the many things that make it possible for the people of Harvard to do their best work and to be their best selves. Here we are, blessed with

both opportunity and community. Here we are, together. And bracing ourselves is the best we can do? I don't think so.

I am a person who has faith in our capacity to listen attentively and generously, to treat one another with decency and respect, to recognize every day how special a place this is. And how much that is a result not of our physical resources, but of our relationships. This is not a time to brace ourselves. This is a time to embrace one another. We can do so by always keeping that third precept in mind. Be one who judges everyone by giving them the benefit of the doubt. By reserving judgment, we make it possible for others to know that they are part of this community and that this community cares for them as much as we hope and expect it will. Disappointment in this regard is a crushing blow not to the will, but to the spirit with belonging and the freedom and peace that it brings out of reach.

We cannot afford to build walls that separate us from one another. We cannot be quick to pass judgment. We must devote ourselves to knowing one another better, to seeing how things look from a perspective that differs from our own. We must try to bring to day-to-day interactions the same commitment to inquiry and discovery that we bring to our intellectual pursuits. If and when tensions among us mount, I hope that we will approach each other not only as fellow human beings, but as potential teachers and friends.

To do so, we must welcome humility and humanity into interactions with each other more readily than a sense of righteousness. I hope that we can grow in understanding, lifting each other up and urging each other on along the way. And I hope most of all, that we can take the time to appreciate the fact that we have the chance to do all of these difficult things in the first place. Here we are, at an institution whose name has long been synonymous with excellence, with opportunities that you could equal. Here we are, together at a university that belongs to each of us as we find teachers and win friends. Let us be slow to judge and quick to renew our commitments to one another as we work to make the world a better place. Thank you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please rise for the prayers.

In lieu of our customary prayers, this morning I'm going to do something a little bit different in recognition of a loss that this community suffered last month. Last month a beloved member of our community, Anya Bassett, died. She was for 30 years part of Harvard University. For the last 20 years, director of undergraduate studies here at Harvard before moving to Brown last year. She exemplified all the virtues President Garber just spoke of. She was kind and warm and open and honest and good. Those of you who have been with us for the 30 years that she was with us here, and here in this chapel many mornings, know that each September she would speak to us. We missed her last year because she went to Brown. We miss her still and we always will. Please join me in a moment of silence for Anya Bassett.

Oh, gracious Lord. We remember before you this day, our sister Anya. We thank you for giving her to us to know and to love as a companion on our earthly pilgrimage. In your boundless compassion, console us who mourn. Bless us with her memory and sustain us with your spirit so that in quiet confidence, we may continue our course here on Earth until by your call, we join those who have gone before. Amen.

And now we pray the words Jesus taught us, saying...

The Rev. Matthew Potts and 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. Amen.

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, hymn Number One.

Congregation:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church, and to Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.

MUSIC:

(music)