

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. Please rise in body and spirit or spirit for our responsive psalm, which is number 15 in your black psalter.

Oh God, who may dwell in your tabernacle? Who may abide upon your holy hill?

Congregation:

Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, who speak truthfully from their hearts.

Elizabeth Propst:

There is no guile upon their tongues. They do no evil to their friends. They do not heap contempt upon their neighbors.

Congregation:

In their sight, the wicked are rejected, but they honor those who fear God.

Elizabeth Propst:

They have sworn to do no wrong and do not take back their word.

Congregation:

They do not give their money in hope of gain, nor do they take bribes against the innocent.

Elizabeth Propst:

Whoever does these things shall never be overthrown.

(singing)

Our reading this morning is from the 20th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, beginning at the 20th verse.

"Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Declare that these two sons of mine will sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your kingdom.' But Jesus answered, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink from the cup that I'm about to drink?' They said to him, 'We are able.' He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my father.'

When the 10 heard it, they were angry with the two brothers, but Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lordeth over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant. And whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave. Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"

Here ends the lesson. As I reflected on this passage this morning in which Jesus sets out the ideal of Christian servant leadership, and as I have been wrapping up my own first semester of graduate school, preparing for a career in ministry, I found myself reflecting on what might've formed my own understanding of leadership and of authority.

I grew up in a pretty small, tight-knit community, almost a village life, the kind that exists less and less in our modern world. And when I think about who I saw as leaders, most of all, they're just mothers that I saw around me who governed the lives of the gaggle of children that moved between our little circle of families, these women who I saw tending to gardens and cooking meals and bandaging our cuts and bruises. I think of my violin teacher, a wonderful woman named Ms. Pam, leading 50 children in a resoundingly awful rendition of Ode to Joy. I think of my teacher, Ms. Luanne, who taught my elementary school classroom during the week and taught my Sunday school on the weekends.

I think about the church that I grew up in. I guess we had a minister whose name was Father Scott. He had some cool robes and he seemed to have a reasonable amount of gravitas. But if you'd asked me, age 10, who was in charge of our church, I would've pointed to the people, most of all the women who you saw handing out programs and greeting newcomers and running the clothing drives and the soup kitchen and putting out the food for coffee hour and cleaning up afterwards.

There's a vision of authority that we might think of as a Harvard kind of authority that comes with a big office and a title and lots of invitations to very important-sounding events. But there's another way that we might think about authority that returns to the root of the word. It comes from this Latin word, "auctor", which is the same place that we get the word author, and it means one who causes to grow. It's this kind of authority that I see in the women who cared for, and in a very real way created, the world that I grew up in. It's the kind of authority that we see in the figure of Jesus who led by teaching, by healing, by feeding, by washing feet.

It's also the kind of authority that I think we might see in the woman who appears in our gospel passage this morning, the mother of the sons of Zebedee. She doesn't get her own name. She's named only in relation to her sons and to her spouse. So I started calling her Janet when I was thinking about this story. I like to imagine that Janet's sons put her up to this request to go ask if they could sit at Jesus's right and left hand in glory, and I imagine them saying, 'Mom, Mom, he'll listen to you. He loves women. Not in a weird way, but he would rather you ask.' It's like, 'I'm not scared.' 'No, I'm not scared. You're scared.' And she asked him this question, but Jesus turns to her sons to answer, almost as if he knows this, right? He turns right to them. He's like, 'Guys, come on, please.'

Janet shows up elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew, not just in this one brief part. Matthew names her as one of the women who are present at the crucifixion among the group of women who, after the disciples have fled, after they're in hiding, including Janet's sons, this group of women who stay when the man that they love needs them the most. If we believe Jesus's words in this passage, the greatest among us is the last, the greatest is the least. And the greatest of Christ followers in the Gospels are not Andrew and John and James and Peter and all of their well-intentioned-ness. It's these women who aren't following Christ in the hopes of being safe, of being famous or powerful, these women who live on the margins of society, on the margins of the story itself. They almost seem like an afterthought to whoever compiled this gospel. And yet, we take Jesus' words at face value. They are easily, unequivocally the greatest.

As we're wrapping up another semester at our university, as we celebrate our first semester of our new president, as we at the Divinity School prepare for our new dean, as we prepare, God help us, for another election year, and if you have been worshiping here at the Memorial Church and you're finding yourself wanting to thank someone here for another wonderful semester, and you're thinking that that person maybe should be one of the people who stand up at the front in fancy robes and pretend at

gravitas, I would urge you instead to thank some other people here in our community, to thank yourselves for the ways that you show up to each other, to thank Verta who cleans this space for us, or Jesus who handles most of our events and our food, or Mark who handles the maintenance and mechanical issues that arise seemingly every day in this old, old building, or Charles who works one billion hours a week managing our finances or any of the Foresters who we all know as always are the real reason that we gather here every weekday morning.

Direct your gratitude towards the people who tell us over and over again through their actions that leadership and authority is not about ascending to the top of the hierarchy, about claiming something, being given something, but instead, it is about putting yourself at the heart of, at the foundation of the world that we might hope to lead or live in. Will you pray with me?

Holy One, we move from one season of celebration to another. We ground ourselves in gratitude for the many gifts that you give us. And we remember as always that we are called to be gifts, to be blessings, to give out of the grace in which you've grounded us. Strengthen us to do so. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise in body or spirit for the Lord's Prayer.

All:

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 to temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please join in our closing hymn, number 41.

(singing)

Just a reminder, we have only two more meetings of morning prayers on Monday and Tuesday of next week before we end on Tuesday. Sad. I'll miss this space, but we'll look forward to seeing you guys back in the spring. Remember, as always, that Christ has no hands in this world but yours, no voice but yours, so may our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love today and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.