

Harriett Lindeman:

Good morning.

Audience:

Good morning.

Harriett Lindeman:

And welcome to Morning Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Robert Hardies, Senior Minister of First Parish Church in Cambridge and Unitarian Universalist Chaplain. Welcome. Please rise in body or in spirit for a responsive reading of Psalm 18 found in your black Appleton Psalter. I adore you, O Lord, my strength.

Audience:

O Lord, my God, my fortress, my restorer, my rock.

Harriett Lindeman:

My rock in whom I seek refuge, my shield, my mighty champion, my haven.

Audience:

Ropes of death encompassed me. Torrents of destruction terrified me.

Harriett Lindeman:

Ropes of Shoel encircled me. Snares of death confronted me.

Audience:

In my distress I called upon the Lord, cried out to my God. In His temple, He heard my voice, my cry to Him reached His ears.

Harriett Lindeman:

You have given me the shield of your protection. Your right hand has sustained me. Your care has made me great.

Audience:

You have left me stride among the free. My feet have not slipped.

Harriett Lindeman:

For this, I sing your praise among the nations, Lord, and hymn your name.

Audience:

He accords great victories to His king, keeps strength with His anointed with David and His offspring forever.

The Rev. Dr. Robert Hardies:

Good morning friends.

Audience:

Good morning.

The Rev. Dr. Robert Hardies:

Before I begin, I'd like to offer a word of gratitude for this community. As a pastor, I don't often have the opportunity to simply come to worship and sit in the pew, to receive the blessings of worship without having to lead it. And since arriving in Cambridge two years ago, this Morning Prayer community has become that place for me; a place where I can count on having time to reflect and pray and delight in the beauty of the music, to worship without the responsibility of leadership. And so, it's been good for my soul and I thank you for that. I also want to thank the members of my church who came and showed up today as well. Good to have you all here.

Several years ago I was walking my son home from elementary school in our neighborhood in Washington when we came across some street art, some graffiti spray-painted on an alley wall, just one sentence of neat, white text on a black background. The text read, "It is in your self-interest to be very tender. It is in your self-interest to be very tender."

The sentence kind of stopped me in my tracks. Let's face it. It's not often you see back alley graffiti promoting virtues like tenderness. Right? I found myself moved and intrigued that someone would speak up for tenderness on the tough streets of DC, that someone would come to the defense of tenderness in the capital of a nation whose culture is so violently polarized.

My son was just learning to read at the time, so we stood on the street and worked through the sentence together. And he asked me, "Papa, what's tenderness?" And I said, "Well, honey, it's a little bit like being kind or gentle or soft." "Soft?" he said. Five is a literal age, so we just left it at kind and gentle.

In the weeks and months that followed, that graffiti stayed with me. What I couldn't wrap my head around was its insistence that tenderness isn't simply a virtue, the right thing to do, but that somehow it is in our self-interest. "It is in your self-interest to be very tender." What did they mean by that? Did they mean it's in our self-interest to be tender to ourselves? Did they mean it in some karmic sense like you reap what you sow, if you're tender to the world, the world will be tender back to you?

The more I puzzled over it, the more the phrase became for me, a kind of Buddhist koan, right, a riddle that reveals more and more layers of meaning without ever yielding a definitive answer. I'd be curious how that sentence strikes all of you. How is it in your self-interest to be tender?

Finally, I Googled it. I Googled it, "It's in your self-interest to be very tender." And that's when I learned that the phrase comes from the conceptual artist Jenny Holzer. In her work, Holzer often uses short aphoristic phrases to grab our attention, surprise us, make us think. Turns out she first put the sentence about tenderness up on a vacant theater marquee in the middle of Chicago, inviting the whole city to reflect together on the importance of tenderness.

Even as I continued to puzzle over the phrase I noticed it struck a chord with my son, but in ways that perhaps I couldn't have anticipated. Basically, he took it upon himself to point out to me whenever I failed to live up to his tenderness standard. "Papa, why are you yelling at the driver of the car in front of us? Papa, why do you get so upset when you read the news on your phone? Papa, why are you being impatient with me?" It's a struggle sometimes, tenderness.

Over the last several months here in Cambridge, I've found myself thinking a lot about this tenderness message. It feels to me like maybe tenderness has been in short supply around here lately. Since the war

began in October, the campus and city have felt on edge. I sense an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Members of our community have been subject to anti-Semitic and Islamophobic racist attacks. The doxxing trucks keep driving by my church in Harvard Square. So many people are hurting right now. Part of me wants to take a page out of Jenny Holzer's playbook and hang a big banner on the front of the church. "Harvard Square, it is in your self-interest to be very tender."

I know I'm as guilty as anybody else. As our nation and world grow increasingly bitter and polarized, I feel myself sucked into that vortex. I struggled to remain soft and gentle and loving. How do we help one another remain tender-hearted?

Many years ago now, the tenderness graffiti vanished. Somebody painted over it. But though it's gone, it's not forgotten. My son was five when we first spotted the message, now he's 12. And to this day, when we pass by that alley, he likes to tell the story. "Papa, remember the sign about tenderness?" I'm glad he remembers, and I'm glad he reminds me. And perhaps today as we go about our work and study, we too can remember to try to be tender with ourselves and with one another. Amen.

Harriett Lindeman:

May it be so. Please rise in body and spirit as we join in prayer. Let us pray as Jesus taught, saying, 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 glory forever and ever. Amen. Let us sing the hymn New Every Morning is the Love, number 47.

And now, as we prepare to leave this place, the peace of God be in your hearts, the love of God be in your hands, the joy of God be in your soul. Go in peace. Amen.

Audience:

Amen.