

MUSIC:

(Music)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to the Appleton Chapel here in our Memorial Church for this daily service of morning prayers. Our responsorial psalm this morning is number 145 in your black psalter. I invite you please to rise and join in reciting it.

I will exalt you, oh holy God, and bless your name forever and ever.

Congregation:

Every day will I bless you and praise your name forever and ever.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Great are you, oh God, and greatly to be praised. There is no end to your greatness.

Congregation:

One generation shall praise your works to another and shall declare your power.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

I will ponder the glorious splendor of your majesty and all your marvelous works.

Congregation:

You uphold all of those who fall. You lift up those who are bowed down.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The eyes of all wait upon you, oh God, and you give them their food in due season.

Congregation:

You will open wide your hand and satisfy the needs of every living creature.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

You are righteous in all your ways and loving in all your works.

Congregation:

You are near to those who call upon you, to all who call upon you faithfully.

MUSIC:

(Music)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is reading from the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, beginning at the second verse, "Early in the morning, Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and He sat down and He began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and making her stand before all of them they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?' They said this to test him so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, He straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again, he bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard this, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and sin no more.'" Here ends the lesson.

Today is the feast day of in our church calendar, our physical church calendar of a saint named Maryam, Maryam of Qidun, traditionally known as Mary the Harlot, which is why we have the lesson we have today. She's a possibly legendary woman. If she did live, she lived in the fourth century near a place called Qidun, which is near what is now the Turkin-Syrian border in southern Turkey. She appears in a story written by a figure we know is historical, the Saint Ephrem of Edessa who was a fourth century saint in Southern what is now southern Turkey.

And there are some parallels between Saint Ephrem's life and the life of one of the characters in the story he tells. So some speculate that it's a sort of thinly veiled autobiographical tale. This is the story that Ephrem tells. He says that there was once a hermit in Qidun named Abraham and Abraham's brother died orphaning his seven-year-old daughter. That girl Maryam came to live with her hermit uncle. He built an outer chamber around his cell and she lived in the outer chamber. He lived in the inner chamber and they had a window where he would talk to her every once in a while. She also brought with her a great deal of money, which she immediately gave away to the poor, and they lived this way for 20 years. Monks regularly came to receive spiritual direction from Abraham and, "One of these monks," Ephrem says, "lusted after Maryam."

At one point they had sex and in her shame, Maryam ran away. After Abraham realized that she was gone, which took some time, he searched for two years hoping to find her until after a dream, he found her living as a sex worker in a faraway town. He disguised himself as a soldier and visited her. She did not recognize him at first, she thought him a customer, but he revealed himself to her and then begged her to return. Finally persuading her after a night of weeping and praying. They returned home together and Maryam lived with Abraham again. He died 10 years after this and she died five years after that, renowned for her prayerfulness.

I could probably preach some remarks about how different fourth-century Syriac child-rearing is from our own. But what I actually want to call the attention to here is the ambivalent Christian relationship to purity. This ideal of perfection in Greek thought. The thought which would've been operating in Jesus's and Ephrem and Abraham's time there was an idea that perfection and completion were the same, to be perfect, to be flawless, but also be fully complete and tired to oneself. And the obvious thing to say is that Christianity resists the idea or ought to of becoming a purity cult.

Jesus's forgiveness in the scene and the story of Abraham and Maryam speak to this, but the conceptual challenge is that there's actually no way to forgive sin without also judging what you have forgiven as sinful. This is the dilemma we find in our reading for example, the goodness and mercy of Jesus's act towards this woman depends upon a prior sense that the woman was a notorious sinner and she might not be of course. A woman at that time who had been sexually assaulted, would've been accused of adultery, as would've Maryam if this monk did what it sounds like he did to her.

Jesus's act is only a grace if the woman is a sinner. And especially in situations like these, I am not ready to grant that condition. So no wonder Maryam runs away. Even if she believes Abraham and God could forgive her why would she want forgiveness on those conditions? And I think this is the narrative power, therefore, of Abraham's two-year search for her and his night of weeping and begging before her. The point perhaps was for him to beg forgiveness of her, to beg forgiveness for how the impossible expectations of Christian purity have driven her and so many others away.

The point that Abraham learned was that God is not to be found in isolated and perfect prayer, but in mutual vulnerability and recognition and need. The point, as Jesus suggests, is that none of us are perfect or complete in isolation. The point is that we need one another. And so instead of driving one another away in judgment, perhaps we should be searching for one another relentlessly as we dream of reunion.

I invite you please to rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray, oh God of holiness and strength rescue us from the sins that ensnare us and destroy the evils that defame us. That like your servant Maryam, we may find our own selves, inseparable from your love, the love made known in Christ Jesus, our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns one God in glory everlasting. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

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 and ever. Amen.

Please join in singing our concluding hymn number 201, God Moves in a Mysterious Way.

MUSIC:

God moves in a mysterious way.

His wonders to perform.

He plants His footsteps in the sea.
And rides upon the storm.
And ye fearful saints, fresh courage take.
The clouds you so much dread.
Are big with mercy and shall break.
In blessings, amen.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense.
But trust Him for His grace.
Behind a frowning providence.
He hides a smiling face.
Blind unbelief is sure to err.
And scan His work in vain.
For God is His own interpreter.
And He will make it plain

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

A few announcements this morning, so I beg patience before the blessing. First, please join us downstairs after this service in the Undercroft for refreshments at Mem Café. Please join us tonight for communion here in this chapel at 6:15 with dinner to follow. We're having Hawaiian food tonight and milkshakes. Tomorrow afternoon after our season of wilderness, my family is being moved back into Sparks House and the first thing we're doing is having after school snacks. So if you want to come for lattes, pumpkin spice, we're returning pumpkin spice to the rotation and holiday treats tomorrow afternoon please join us at Sparks House from 4:00 to 5:30.

Lastly, this Sunday, we're having a very special celebration of all Saints. In addition to remembering all the dead, all the beloved departed, we're also dedicating a special panel on the pulpit for the late Reverend Peter Gomes. It promises to be a really beautiful ceremony, celebration, and commemoration. So please join us for that as well. Okay? That's it. Now, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you this day and remain with you always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.

MUSIC:

(Music)