

Conspiracies

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

FALL 2017 VOL. 6 No. 1

# Conspiracies

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## DEATH AND NEW BEGINNINGS

CHRISTINA DESERT  
MDiv '19



*Christina Desert offered this reflection at the HDS Noon Service hosted by the HDS Student Association on September 6, 2017. Christina serves as the Student Affairs chair for the HDSSA.*

After a year spent thinking about black women, the scars on their bodies and the stories that these bodily markings tell, this past summer, I reflected mostly about death. What happens when these bodies that bear witness are no longer present among us?

In her book, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Edwige Danticat writes:

*“In Haiti, people never really die,” my aunts and grandmothers said when I was a child, which seemed strange, because in Haiti, people were always dying. They died in disasters both natural and man-made. They died from political violence. They died of infections that would have been easily treated elsewhere. They even died of chagrin, of broken hearts. But what I didn’t fully understand was that in Haiti people’s spirits never really die. This has been proved true in the stories I have seen and read since the earthquake, of boundless suffering endured with grace and dignity: mothers have spent nights standing knee-deep in mud, cradling their babies in their arms, while rain pounded the tarpaulin above their heads; amputees have learned to walk, and even dance, on their new prostheses within hours of getting them; rape victims have created organizations to protect other rape victims; people have tried, in any way they could, to reclaim a shadow of their past lives...*

*[She continued] In the days following January 12, 2010, while watching the crumbled buildings and crushed bodies that were shown around the clock on American television, I thought that I was witnessing the darkest moment in Haiti’s history. Then I heard one of the survivors say, either on radio or on television, that during the earthquake it was as if the earth had become liquid, like water. That’s when I began to imagine them, all these thousands and thousands of souls, slipping into the country’s rivers and streams, then waiting out their year and a day before reemerging and reclaiming their places among us. And, briefly, I was hopeful.*

Danticat was hopeful because she recognizes that in Haiti, particularly in the Vodou tradition, death is not an end. It is a moment of transition. It is a journey. This journey, we begin to travel the moment we are born. For the Haitian people, death, this act of transitioning, is another kind of birth. It offers a new beginning. Indeed, in our own spirituality, we believe that the dead and the living walk side by side. We pray for those who have died. They continue to teach us as we continue to remember them. Their courageous spirits remain palpable in Haiti as women and men walk through raging fires in Haiti’s streets to share their stories, encounter one another, and transform their nation. When called out, their spirits echo through the thunderous rain, as men and women, girls and boys, seek to protect themselves and rise up with dignity after a disastrous hurricane. Every time the Haitian people break their silence to confront the status quo and pursue justice within their nation, their spirit rises up from the waters and resides in each person.

If, like the Haitian people, we believe every day, we

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are all dying, I invite you to join me this year in our writing, in our field placements, in the work that we do, to accompany one another, to walk this journey with communities and peoples who are suffering. Let us give birth to those in pain by helping them carry the cross they bear. Let not our grief, our suffering, silence us. Today, tomorrow, and the day after that. Let us, together. Make new beginnings.



Stephanie Mitchell

## OUR STRENGTH AND REFUGE

JENNA ALATRISTE  
MDiv '18



*Jenna Alatryste delivered this reflection at the September 2017 Noon Service hosted by the HDS members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.*

A few weeks ago I woke up at 3 a.m. in pain with a health issue that caused surgery in the past, and I worried I'd soon be back in the hospital, undergoing another surgery. To distract myself, I decided to read the news—which is probably the worst thing I could have done. I learned about the Equifax breach and that an earthquake had just hit Mexico, a place I love dearly and where nearly all of my in-laws live. Meanwhile, Irma

had left a path of destruction and was on its way to Florida, the home of many loved ones and where I spent a year and a half of my life as a Mormon missionary. A cousin had died a few days prior in a car accident. Harvey had left its devastation. Meanwhile, racism and expressions of hatred abound in the world, along with politicians who divide and ban rather than unify and welcome in loving arms.

I didn't know that soon there would be more earthquakes, another hurricane, and more shootings, including a shooting and at a church.

As I sat in pain in the dark in my living room reading this news at 3 a.m., I felt struck by the limits of mortality and the immense suffering of people throughout the world. I thought of the war, famine, disasters, and hatred that devastate the lives of millions of people and touch us all as a human family.

My question today for us as a congregation and as students, staff, and faculty at the remarkable institution of HDS is: How do we find a place where we're not overwhelmed by suffering but rather propelled and energized to fulfil our vocation?

Trauma has always existed but we feel it weigh on us like never before. Personal and collective trauma continue to build as we populate the world and became more interconnected. Because of access to each other and to information across the world, the trauma can be in our face all the time. I could be reading about it, even watching footage of it, on my smartphone 24/7. In this period of human history marked by connection, my thought today is that we must find time to disconnect from the noise and to recharge—to elevate our sights in order to receive inspiration for how we can best respond to suffering, both in ourselves and in others.

When I say disconnect and elevate our sights, I don't mean we ignore needs. On the contrary, taking time to look up enables us to better serve because when we access righteous powers bigger than ourselves, we become the best version of ourselves and find strength to do things we haven't previously had the strength to do.

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How can we elevate our sight to do this? Consider this personally for you. If something comes to mind, jot it down. What are your sources of comfort, strength, and refuge? What do you do to disconnect from harsh noise, to make space for subtle quiet spiritual workings in yourself? To find yourself? To remember who you truly are? To see your potential? When things feel impossible and too big, go back to those sources.

Some of my own sources of comfort, strength, and refuge are prayer, meditation, practicing yoga, reading scripture, holding a child in my arms, journaling, walking in nature, worshiping in sacred temples. These practices connect me to Heavenly Sources. Making this space allows me to commune with God, to feel the perfect, unconditional love of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit—even to feel the love of ancestors who have gone before me and faced immense difficulty—and to feel the love of angels who surround me today, some of whom are in this room.

Who are your angels? Who ministers to you?

You have a unique calling in life that only you can fulfil. YOU are needed. Your passion is needed, your talents, your skills, your strengths—and even your weaknesses. And God promises that weaknesses can be made strong. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus tells a prophet:

“If men [and women] come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto [them] weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all...that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong.”

All of your experiences, everything that makes you the person you are, gives you a particular skill set that is needed. You serve the world in ways that other people can't.

The problems for you to address will always be here—there will always be a need for you to address. We all have work to do. That is why we must protect and consecrate a portion of our time to do what we often refer to at HDS as self-care—to fill our own cup. To be healthy both spiritually and physically so we can answer our callings in life.



Kristie Welsh

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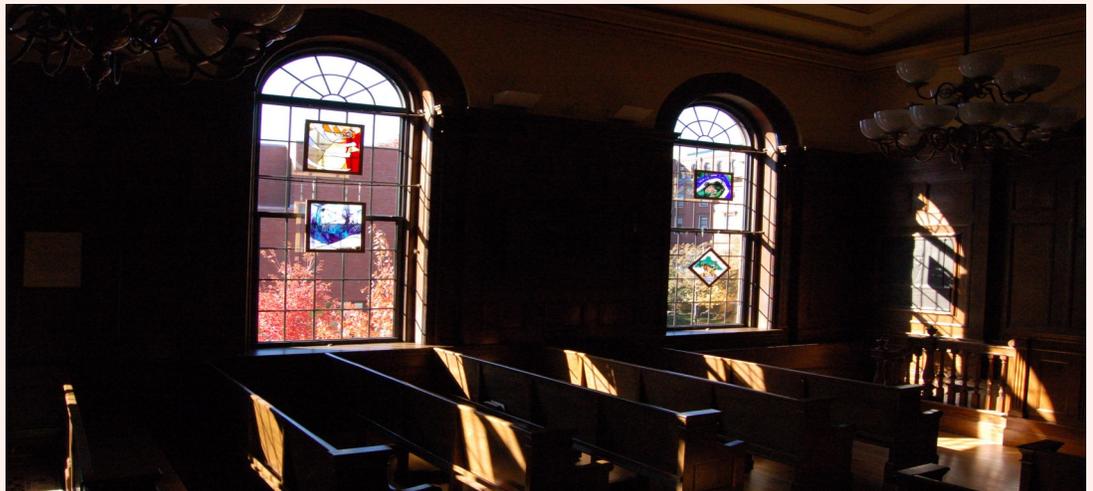
We are not alone on our journey—not alone in our relationships, in our studies, in our work, in our joy and in our pain. The Lord promises: “I will not leave you comfortless...I will come to you...”

Wise words in Psalm 46 and Psalm 9 read: “We will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof...The Lord...will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble.”

And as Natalie read from the Book of Mormon: “Remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds...his shafts in the whirlwind...when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men [and women] build they cannot fall.”

The mighty winds and storms will prevail around us. But we can be rooted, we can stand on the rock of the Redeemer. And with this foundation, we have a promise that we cannot fall.

When our service is centered, refreshed and motivated by Divine love—and when our efforts are magnified, carried, and given by grace—we see through new eyes. We see people and situations differently. We see ourselves differently. Our work is infused with innovation, humility, energy, charity, patience, and forgiveness—not just forgiveness of others but forgiveness of ourselves and our own weaknesses as human beings. We can be sustained and held up by loving hands—hands that know our worth, goodness, light, divinity and ability.



Kristie Welsh

# FORGIVENESS

ISAAC MARTINEZ  
MDiv '19



*Isaac Martinez preached this sermon at HDS's weekly Monday Episcopal/Anglican Eucharist on September 18, 2017.*

*Proper 19 Year A Track 2 - 9-18-17*

*Lections: Gen. 50:15-21; Ps.*

*103:1-13; Rom. 14:1-12; Matt. 18:21-35*

-May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O God our rock and our redeemer, Amen.

Good afternoon, for those who don't know me, I'm Isaac Martinez and I'm a second-year MDiv student here at HDS. I must say I'm kind of excited to be preaching on these rich readings. But I must say I'm also a little nervous because I took Matt Pott's "Forgiveness" class last spring, and in case you hadn't noticed, forgiveness is kind of a big deal in our readings today. "How often should I forgive?" Peter asks Jesus right off the bat. "If my brother or sister sins against me, how many times should I forgive them? Surely seven times is enough." Perhaps Peter thought, "Hmm, seven times is a generous yet reasonable limit to forgiving someone who repeatedly wrongs me." Now, as one commentator points out, at this point in Matthew's narrative, Peter already has a good idea of who Jesus is and what he's up to. Peter has proclaimed Jesus as the messiah, as God's anointed and promised one. In the chapter before this, Peter has even been an eyewitness to Jesus's divine transfiguration. "Yes," Peter may have thought to himself, "After almost three years with this guy, I'm finally starting to get it. I should forgive not once, not twice, not even

three times, but seven times."

And Jesus responds like someone who knows he's running out of time and these people, his followers, his community, are still having trouble understanding his vision of the reign of God. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus keeps trying to teach the disciples how much God intends to turn the unjust and oppressive systems of the world, which get replayed and reinforced in our personal relationships.

in God's reign, the greatest is in fact humble like a child. In God's reign, we are fully aware of the impact of our actions and we don't place stumbling blocks in front of each other. In God's reign, we resolve our disagreements face-to-face, through discussion, and without power plays. And in God's reign, forgiveness is infinite. God infinitely forgives us and She invites us to forgive each other infinitely in return. So it's as if Jesus is saying back to Peter, "Good try. But seven is a number you can keep count of. 'And if you keep count, it's not called forgiveness.'"

With apologies to you, Matt, I'm going to skip over trying to pinpoint exactly what we mean by forgiveness to instead notice that the overall vision Jesus points us to, for all its beauty, can be so difficult to intellectually comprehend, let alone to attempt to "live to the Lord," as Paul puts it in today's epistle. Even Christian communities, whether the first one gathered around Jesus, or the later ones that Paul preached and wrote to, or the ones we attend or serve today, seem to get it more wrong than right.

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And yet here we face a paradox, I think. Because it can be tempting, especially in the hyper-individualistic culture we live in, to acknowledge that communities, especially churches, are so far from the reign of God, seem so infused with the values and priorities of this world, that we then say to ourselves, “Oh, well, I can do this on my own. I’ll be humble on my own. I can figure out what it means to forgive infinitely on my own.”

But to give into that temptation is to forget the wisdom in Paul’s words, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” So we need our churches, as broken as they might be, as far afield from the vision of God’s reign as they might be, because we help each other remember, what it means to belong to God. We help each other remember as we worship and fellowship, as we serve and work for justice.

And when we, as a church, do get it right, when we do manage for a fleeting moment to live into God’s reign, then we can be a mirror to the world and its values, and we can reflect to our institutions and societies where their actions and outcomes fall far short of what they aspire to.

We don’t even have to look all that far to see that the world around us needs us to be that mirror. This past week alone, leaders of other Harvard schools have shown what they truly believe.

In rescinding a visiting fellowship to Chelsea Manning at the request of current and former CIA officials, while letting members of the Trump campaign and

administration keep those same fellowships, the Harvard Kennedy School has shown that to them, greatness is not about humility, but about access to power.

And more illustrative of how much Harvard needs a mirror can be seen in the story of Michelle Jones. Michelle Jones is already an accomplished historian. By the age of 45, she earned a bachelor’s degree and lead a research team that uncovered what happened to women incarcerated in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Indiana, what their crimes were and what their fates were in prison. This research project won a top award from the Indiana Historical Society. And Jones wanted to keep going, so she applied to PhD programs across the country. And she did it all from prison herself. You see, Jones, the victim of unjust and oppressive systems that left her abused, poor, and unable to access adequate mental healthcare, was herself the perpetrator of a violent crime. She served 20 years of a 50-year sentence for murdering her four-year old child. Yet, in prison, she managed to completely turn her life around, with the help of many, many people. As one commentator says, “It is difficult to overstate the magnitude of Jones’ accomplishment. We make prisoners sleep in cages, do menial work for nickels and dimes, and stand up and sit down on command. We neutralize their individuality by dressing them identically and referring to them by government-assigned numbers. We let them see and talk to their families only under intense surveillance. In many facilities, we provide inadequate health care and menial education and job training opportunities, and turn a blind eye to the physical and emotional abuse they endure at the hands of correctional officers and other prisoners. Yet we expect that upon their release these prisoners will not just behave better, but *be* better than they were when

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they committed their crimes.” Michelle Jones is a better person. And both the History and American Studies departments at Harvard accepted her to do her PhD work here. But out of fear for how it might look, some other professors and administrators teamed up to rescind her acceptance on the basis that she did not adequately account for her past crime and that she might have trouble acclimating. But whatever their reasons, they have shown that they believe there is a limit to forgiveness. Yes, our own university is in need of a mirror.



Kristie Welsh

But what can we, a small group of Episcopalians and Anglicans, at Harvard Divinity School, do about that? If it's so difficult, how can we make the reign of God more real in our own lives let alone more real at Harvard and all the places beyond?

Obviously, I don't have the whole answer. But I think a good place to start is to remember that we learn how to grow in love, we learn how to better follow Jesus towards this vision of God's reign, by being in community, in intentional relationship with fellow seekers. Some of us may have those communities already. They may be parishes we've found a home in. They may be our families. They may even be our friends and colleagues here at HDS. But my hope for us this year is that we, the HDS Episcopal/Anglican Fellowship, can become one of those communities, one of those schools of love, as well. I hope that we can learn to take risks with each other, to be vulnerable with each other, how to help each other keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, to maybe make some mistakes and then to also learn how to forgive. Because I believe that if we can do that, then we might surprise ourselves with what we bring to other places, to our classes, to our friendships outside of here, perhaps even to those other parts of Harvard that find it hard to match their behavior to their stated values.

Friends, Jesus came to shake up a world that is unjust and to heal what is broken. That is good news. Something in us wants to be part of that saving work. And that is good news. And God gives us everything we need to do that work, including each other. And that is good news. So as we live, let us live to and for a God of infinite love and forgiveness. Amen.

## IN SEARCH OF RIDDLE-MIND

ELIZABETH AESCHLIMANN

MDiv '17



*Liz Aeschlimann delivered this d'var Torah for Rosh Hashanah in September 2017 at Vassar College, where she serves as the Assistant Director of Religious and Spiritual Life and the Rachlin Director for Jewish Student Life.*

This year, at moments when the world seemed beyond comprehension and everything seemed broken, I experienced something that I never had before.

I could not read. Non-fiction felt irrelevant or too painful, like pressing on a raw wound. Fiction asked me to lose myself in another world and I could not turn away from this one.

As hate and violence bloomed around me, I turned to poetry.

From "Steady Summer," by Layli Long Soldier:

in June light  
here I'm certain  
that certain  
kinds of talk  
only = pain excusing  
myself I paddle  
deep in high  
grass waves I'm safer  
outdoors than in/in those  
heady grasses of the mouth

What is it about poetry that can heal, even as it pierces with deep truth?

In one of three essays about the generative energies of poetry, Jane Hirshfield writes about hiddenness as an essential quality of poetry's power.<sup>1</sup>

Hiddenness is also central to Jewish imagination, a basic quality of the universe.

16<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria explained that during the process of Creation, God sent ten vessels into the world filled with divine light. But they shattered, scattering divine light throughout the universe in shards as numerous as grains of sand. These shards, said Luria, are hidden in all things. Our purpose as humans, as Jews, is to gather them up again, to seek wholeness, the repair of the shards.

Divine light, like goodness or truth, is not a holy grail, a thing to be found or a place to be reached. It is never complete: we find it in shards, in moments, in glimmers that evoke but never reveal the whole. Often, they are not

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in plain sight: we come upon these shards of light when we look within a person, a story, a situation, and see beyond the flat surfaces of our initial impressions.

Like poetry, our traditions of reading Torah and other sacred texts are practices of looking within, of opening up a multiplicity of meanings rather than uncovering a single right answer. “Just as a hammer strikes many sparks, so a single scriptural passage yields many senses,” say the ancient rabbis (Sanhedrin 34a).

Today, we read the story of Isaac’s birth, and of Sarah and Abraham sending Ishmael, Abraham’s son by Sarah’s maidservant Hagar, out into the wilderness so that Isaac’s inheritance will not be threatened. It is a troubling story, one hard to read without the echoes of today’s geopolitics.

Is it a story of the creation of two great nations?

Is it a parable of exile that foreshadows the situation of Israelis and Palestinians today?

Or do unrecorded parts of the story justify this banishment, as certain Jewish fables have imagined?

We can weigh possible interpretations against what we know and what is in our hearts on this particular day, in this particular time, but the true meaning, if such a thing exists, remains hidden.

This hiddenness of truth, I believe, is for the better.

There is a sacredness to things we cannot know, things with no objective truth.

The true danger lies in things that remain hidden because we willfully refuse to see them, or because we are so caught up in our own perspective that we do not notice what lies before us.

Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert with some bread and a waterskin and they walk, perhaps with no direction in mind but forward. When the waterskin is empty, Hagar prepares herself for the death of her son Ishmael and begins to cry.

The Torah tells us that an angel comes to Hagar then, saying, “Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him” (Gen 21:17). Then, we read, “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled a skin with water and let the boy drink” (Gen 21:19).

The construction of the sentence is ambiguous. Did God perform a miracle and create a well there in the desert? Or was Hagar too distressed to see that the well was there all along?

Tomorrow, we will read the story of the binding of Isaac, the near death of Abraham’s second son, when God asks Abraham to bring Isaac to Moriah and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Again, an angel intervenes at the last moment. The texts tells us, “When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So

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Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son” (Gen 22:13).

Did God provide a ram there in the thicket where none was before? Or was Abraham so intent on his task, so certain of his interpretation of his duty, that he could not see it was there all along?

With its ambiguities and contradictions and layers of meaning Torah begs us—teaches us—to read with respect for what we cannot determine and insight that pierces through the narrowness of our sight.

Our texts, filled with riddles and hidden meanings, beg us to look up from our own narrow points of view.

Hirshfield writes, “Riddle-mind, whether spiritual, psychological, or secular, awakens a long-strided intelligence, breaking thought loose from the habitual and the stolid.... Something in us awakens and breathes more deeply when it feels the world to be thus supple in its transformations and meanings ” (15-16).

So what is riddle-mind?

In the Talmud, the ancient rabbis tell of an argument over the purity or impurity of The Oven of Achnai (Bava Metzia 59a). Rabbi Eliezar attempts to prove that his opinion is correct by appealing to the walls of the study house. He says, “If [the law] is as I say, let the walls of the academy prove it.” The walls of the academy begin to fall. Rabbi Yehoshua, the leader with the opposing opinion, rebukes the walls for getting involved in an argument between scholars.

The Talmud tells us, “They did not fall because of the honor of R. Yehoshua, and they did not stand because of the honor of R. Eliezar, and they are still inclining and standing.”

Given two options: “the walls should fall” and “the walls should not fall,” our tradition saw another possibility. Riddle-mind is the walls inclining to an angle—and staying that way “inclining and standing” for hundreds of years.

As physicist Niels Bohr said, “The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth.”

In a world that can be so bleak and cruel, riddle-mind is not a luxury but a necessity.

We need the playful, slippery riddle-mind to look at words that have always meant one thing and see another possibility.

We need riddle-mind’s long-strided intelligence to break loose from oppressions that have choked us of air for centuries.

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We need riddle-mind to acknowledge what we do not know and to shake us out of the narrow vision that obscures the well right there before us.

Rosh Hashanah is considered, among many other meanings, to be a Day of Concealment. On this Day of Concealment, let us dispense with certainty and breathe more deeply with the suppleness of all we do not know. May this be a year of divine shards gathered with patience and generosity. May this be a year of poetry. May this be a year of riddle-mind.



Kristie Welsh

1. Jane Hirshfield, *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry*. Bloodaxe Books, 2008.

## MADE FOR MORE THAN NUMB

WILSON HOOD  
MDiv '19



*Wilson Hood wrote this sermon for class on Unitarian Universalist history in October 2017. Wilson is serving as a Chaplain Intern in the HDS Office of the Chaplain and Religious and Spiritual Life in 2017-2018.*

How have your mornings been lately? If you're anything like me and you have or recently have had a breaking news app downloaded on your smartphone, you've probably gotten used to some form of the following daily ritual: brush your teeth (hopefully), turn out the lights, crawl into bed, eventually fall asleep if you're lucky, wake up, rub your eyes, check your phone, read a notification of another major incident of unimaginable suffering in our world, rinse, and repeat. Have you spent any time recently in the shower staring blankly at the tile across from you through a haze of steam, trying to make sense of the latest headline or casualty list or Twitter rampage? Have you stood at a closet door or dresser drawer, dazedly attempting to pick out something to wear for the day while anxiety and fear wrestle for control at the back of your mind? Have you started to dread what the sunrise feels like? Because I have.

Las Vegas.  
Puerto Rico.  
Mexico.  
Houston.  
Florida.  
Syria.  
Catalonia.  
The Caribbean.  
Myanmar.

Flint, Michigan.  
Charlottesville, Virginia.  
South Boston.

The unholy litany never ends, and the notification chimes of our phones have begun to sound more and more like funeral bells. We could choose to turn them off, of course, and silence the merciless drumbeat of the world's trauma in our ears, but that would neither ease the suffering nor eliminate our awareness of it. After all, there's still the laptop, the tablet, the television, the email inbox, and the inevitable subject matter of our daily conversations with one another. In the age of the Internet, we are more connected and more aware of the lives of our neighbors, near and far, than at any other moment in human history. However, the dawn of this brave new world, this world of push notifications and 24-hour news coverage, illuminates not only the peaks of our public life but also the darkest shadows of our valleys, and our eyes have been irreversibly (though far from completely) opened to the scope of human suffering on our planet, in our nation, and in our own backyards.

As media companies flatten and condense the vast landscape of tragedy around us into consumable soundbites, our culture performs a grotesque kind of alchemy. We transform the miraculously particular lives of the fallen and suffering- their names, their faces smiling in graduation photos retrieved from dusty closet shoeboxes, their reflections still glimmering in the eyes of those who love them- into hashtags and headlines devoid of context, of history, of a soul. We continue holding vigil in the dark before our glowing screens and watch, somehow stunned, as once again death transfigures into mere

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data. Amid the brutality of this cultural vampirism, this violent draining of the stuff of life from broken and lifeless bodies, the temptation toward a certain kind of numbness can be darkly attractive as a way simply to make it through the day. We can begin to treat suffering and cruelty not as singular moments in real human lives worth our attention and reverence, but rather as something more akin to the weather, a disturbing backdrop to the ordinary pageant of homework, dentist appointments, and laundry. As people of faith, how are we called to respond to this dangerous temptation toward numbness? What resources might our theologies offer in a world intent not only on inflicting suffering and death, but also on keeping it routine?

In “Likeness to God,” an ordination sermon delivered in 1828, Unitarian Christian minister and theologian William Ellery Channing offers a view of God radically different from those proposed by many dominant theological voices of his age. Rather than maintaining a rigid, quintessentially Calvinist distinction between the moral bankruptcy of humanity and the overwhelming majesty of the divine, Channing takes his cue instead primarily from the climax of the first creation narrative in Genesis: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27 NRSV). Channing insists that we, as human beings, have continued to bear the fingerprints of this divine resemblance long after our exile from Eden. “In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity,” Channing writes. “It is the resemblance of a parent to a child, the likeness of a kindred nature.”

For many both in Channing’s day and in the present

moment, this notion of a human “likeness to God” is both beautiful and troubling. Once the feel-good theological glow has faded, we’re left continuing to face the ravages of human neglect, greed, and oppression all around us, and the flickering hope that anyone could look much of anything like God seems to sputter out. After all, as Channing stood lecturing comfortably from the pulpit in 1828, chattel slavery of enslaved African peoples continued to flourish, sodomy laws targeting queer and transgender individuals were still considered offenses worthy of the death penalty in many states, and the political pressure which would eventually result in the Trail of Tears was reaching a fever pitch. Given the sheer scope of our historic and present barbarity, how could we ever suggest that human beings contain a reflection of any God worth believing in?

This idea of divine likeness presents a host of problems to many conservative and liberal theologies alike. For those who prefer a bearded, imposing God seated on a golden throne far above the bloody chaos of human life, this theology threatens to gravely misstate both God’s regal majesty and the depth of our brokenness. By contrast, for some liberal theologies, this view robs the divine of mystery and transcendence, threatening to transform holy Presence into a mere reflection of existing, oppressive notions of who exactly is considered “human” in any given historical context.

However, to speak of human beings as bearing a likeness to God is *not* necessarily to suggest that the divine is burdened with the brutality and ordinariness of human life. When we assert that we are made in the image of God, we are not also saying that God watches Jeopardy or voted for Hillary

# MADE FOR MORE THAN NUMB

WILSON HOOD

MDiv '19

Clinton. Rather than projecting humanness onto God, what if we instead are suggesting that human beings, each and every one of us, are imbued with divine mystery, with that very same substance that leaves us breathless at a sunset or a summer rainstorm or the birth of newborn child? “God’s infinity places him beyond the resemblance and approach of man,” Channing writes. “I affirm, and trust that I do not speak too strongly, that there are traces of infinity in the human mind; and that, in this very respect, it bears a likeness to God.”

Take a minute and look at a person sitting beside you. How would your perception change in this very moment if you looked at them in the knowledge that they carry an entire cosmos, a holy mystery worthy of generations of poets and prophets, inside them? With what reverence and awestruck love might you approach them knowing that they contain depths more vast and unknowable than the immensity of the night sky? Now imagine extending this level of awareness to everyone you see on a daily basis—neighbors, friends, coworkers, the cashier at the grocery store, the man sleeping in the park near your house. Imagine looking at them knowing, in the deepest core of your being, that each step they take in this world is a step onto holy ground. Maybe this is what theologians mean when they speak of *incarnation*—the observation that every single person who has ever lived is a sacred mystery worthy of our reverence.

When we view human life through this lens, the siren call of spiritual numbness in the wake of tragedy and injustice becomes unthinkable. When we look at the front-page photograph of the dead and the starving and see a priceless reflection of God staring back at us, mysterious and beautiful and worthy of our utter

devotion, how can we ever normalize their loss or suffering? Moreover, when we look through our computer screens into the eyes of those who have committed unspeakable atrocities, how can we not feel the unbearable tragic weight of knowing just how thoroughly they have lost sight of their own true nature? When we choose to bear witness to and hold space for the divine mystery at the heart of every human being, we resist a culture that thrives on the commodification of death and the rendering of bodies as disposable and worthy of cages or exploitation. Indeed, when we see ourselves and one another through these eyes, the world starts to look a lot less like CNN, and a lot more like Calvary.

The work of our theology must be the work of bearing witness to the divine echo at the heart of every single person we encounter, near and far, on the subway or on the front page of the New York Times. The work of our faith must be one of carrying together the memories and names of those we’ve lost as neither simply hashtags nor statistics, but rather as children of God. When we opt for spiritual presence instead of absence, for bearing witness instead of numbing ourselves, when we choose to hold the sacred mystery and awe-inspiring complexity of every life even when our hands shake, we begin to live into the holy truth we already know—that we, too, are made in the image of God. Amen.

# OUR FATHER: BUILDING A PRAYER TOGETHER

SALLY FRITSCHÉ  
MDIV '18



*Sally Fritsche preached this sermon at the weekly Friday HDS service of HUUMS, the Harvard Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Students, in October 2017.*

Reading by Parker Palmer

Heavenly Father, heavenly Mother,  
holy and blessed is your true name.

We pray for your reign of peace to come,

we pray that your good will be done,  
let heaven and earth become one.

Give us this day the bread we need,  
give it to those who have none.

Let forgiveness flow like a river between us,  
from each one to each one.

Lead us to holy innocence  
beyond the evil of our days —

Come swiftly

Mother, Father, come.

For yours is the power and the glory and the mercy:

Forever your name is All in One.

The first time I ever recited the Our Father, I was fakin' it, big time. I was the maid-of-honor in my best friend's wedding the year after High School. A Catholic wedding. So I'm standing up in front of a church full of people, the priest says "Let us pray," and everyone begins together: "Our Father, who art in heaven..." And I felt like it'd be pretty conspicuous if I just stood there silently, so I did my best and moved my mouth along with the words. "Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." And surprisingly, I pretty much knew the words! Somehow, through cultural osmosis and general Christian ubiquity, the words of this prayer were there, filed away somewhere in the back of my brain.

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

# OUR FATHER: BUILDING A PRAYER TOGETHER

SALLY FRITSCHÉ  
MDIV '18

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.

Other than being pretty impressed with myself for being able to recite it, I didn't pay too much attention to the content, or think too hard about it was. I wasn't Christian, wasn't really even theistic, so it was just words to me. Lightly spoken and easily let go once the Mass was over.

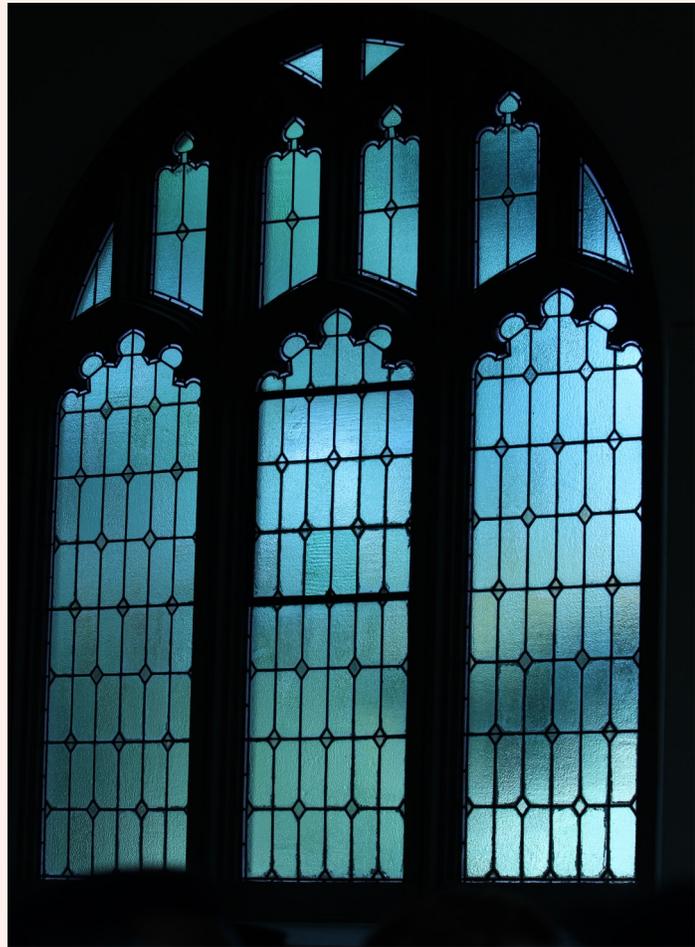
The second time I recited the Our Father, it was actually an Our Mother. At my UU congregation's Mother's Day service, we read a version of the prayer published by the Minnesota Women's Press:

Our mother, which art the earth,  
nurturing are thy ways.  
thy web of life be woven  
thy way be found within,  
as it is all around.

Thank you this day  
for our daily bread and sweat  
and forgive us our misuse of you,  
as we forgive others  
their misuse of us.

And lead us not into exploitation,  
But deliver us  
from lording it over you,  
and over each other,  
and over all our fellow creatures.

For thine are the waters of life,  
the hills, valleys



Kristie Welsh

# OUR FATHER: BUILDING A PRAYER TOGETHER

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and plains of home,  
the breeding, seeding,  
feeding ground,  
For now, and for as close to forever as we will ever come.

This one I paid attention to. There's something about changing the words that makes me also think about what the words *used* to be. "Deliver us from lording it over each other." And now I have to think about what we need most to be delivered from. And maybe all the writers-of-this-prayer mean, is that lording it over others IS evil, is the definition of evil. And what's the difference between being led into temptation and being led into exploitation? Is that what we are most tempted to do?

Changing the words somehow clarifies what the prayer can *mean*.

Forever and ever. For now, and for as close to forever as we will ever come. ...The rewrite feels like a clever trick, but an honest one. A way to turn this old prayer into something alive again. When I heard it, I liked it, and I remembered it long after I left church that Sunday.

The third time I recited the Our Father was the first time I felt it in my bones and eyes and throat. It was the first time I really meant something by it. I was in the hospital room of a dying man, and his family needed a chaplain. They looked to me and asked for the Lord's Prayer.

I recited it, they joined me, and that old worn out prayer flowed into that room with as much life as... an unclenching fist. It was surrendering: Hallowed be thy name, thy will be done. AND it was demanding: give us, forgive us, lead us not... deliver us, from evil. I didn't *think* about the words, didn't justify the theology to myself, but I *felt* all the desperate duality of human need in that prayer.

I lost count of the number of times I recited the Our Father over the course of my summer at the hospital. People wanted to hear it before they went into surgery, after they'd given birth, before they died. They prayed it in gratitude, in pain, in desperation, in hope.

"Our Father," they prayed, "Who art in heaven" Please don't abandon me. I know there are things I cannot control. I am asking for help. I am not giving up, but I am tired. Deliver me from evil.

And every time, this atheist chaplain was holding their hand and helping the words come.

There are so many versions of the Our Father. It seems everyone who has ever considered themselves as theologians have tried their hand at rewriting it. The Parker Palmer version Aileen read is one of my favorites.

# OUR FATHER: BUILDING A PRAYER TOGETHER

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And while I've learned to appreciate the memorized, recitable, nearly universally familiar version, I have to admit the words aren't quite right. For me. I began to wonder what is it I am saying when I say this prayer? Something about wanting to be reassured that the forces that control our world might care about us, love us, like a parent loves a child. What do I feel when I hold someone's hand to recite it? And can I put that into words? I began to try to translate each line into my own words, and this is what I wrote:

Humanity is still a child  
Reaching for our parent's hand  
The future comes  
And comes undone  
We can't control or understand.

We are always hungry  
And we don't yet know  
how to feel full or how to let go

We want so badly to do good  
And we want so badly to feel safe  
And that is the beauty, the struggle, and the worry.  
In every time, in every place.  
Amen.

I am going to invite you to do the same today. To sit with this prayer, "Our Father," and find the words to express it that are most true to you, right now. This is not a classroom assignment, it is a prayer. You can participate as much or as little as you like.

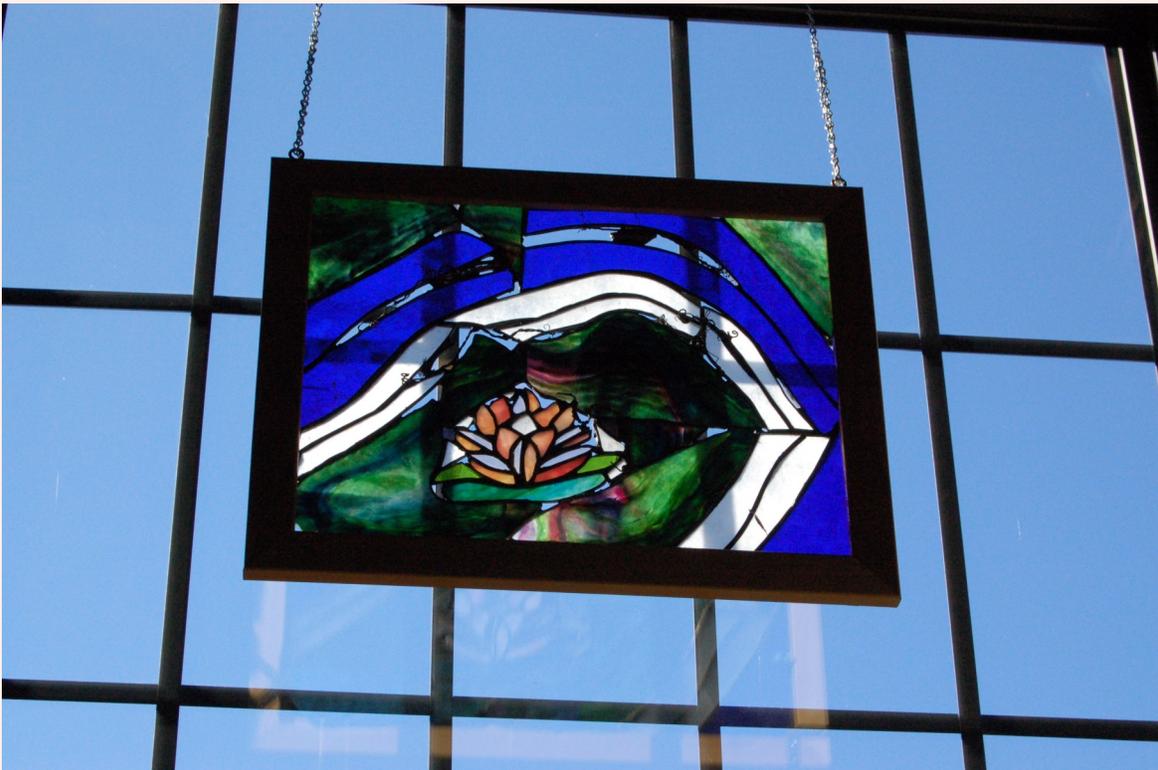
Each of you will get a slip of paper with one or two lines of this prayer. I'm going to give a minute of silent reflection on your own, to truly consider how you might translate these lines... And maybe you would keep them entirely the same. And maybe you would say nothing at all, leave it blank. If that's your truth, do it. Then (when I chime the bell) you can join up with others who have the same line, and together you will find words that can express this snippet of prayer for you both. Today we are going to build an Our Father for *this* community, in this moment.

Look at your line, take a breath, and for the next minute, you can write, think, close your eyes, do whatever you need, to begin to consider what these words might mean to you.

# OUR FATHER: BUILDING A PRAYER TOGETHER

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To minimize any milling about, imagine the room is a clock face, with me at 12. Whatever the number is on your sheet, in a moment, you will go to that point on the clock face, and find the others with your same line of prayer. Together you are going to find new words to express this prayer. Don't be afraid to compromise and don't be afraid to defend your theology. And if that means you need two or three contradictory versions, so be it. Today we want to say what we mean, and mean what we say. When your prayer fragment is complete, please write it down on a clean sheet. When I chime the bell again, one reader from each group will return to the center, and we will read *our* Our Father.



Kristie Welsh

## BEING A DISCIPLE OF THE BUDDHA

RUTDOW JIRAPRAPASUKE, MTS '18, NINA BRYCE, MDIV '19, AND ANH TRAN, MDIV '19

*These words were offered by Rutdow Jiraprapasuke, Nina Bryce, Anh Tran at the opening of the weekly Noon Service hosted by the HDS Buddhists in October 2017.*

Welcome to noon service, hosted by Harvard Buddhist Community at HDS. Thank you for your presence here. Today we would like to invite everyone to establish calm, clarity, courage, and compassion to confront the wretchedness that we have inflicted upon each other.

We want to begin by asking this question: What does it mean to be a disciple of the Buddha? What does it mean to practice the dharma?

Here is a verse from the Dhammapada:  
Whoever being depraved,  
Devoid of self-control  
And truthfulness,  
Dons the yellow robe,  
He is surely not worthy of it.  
But, whoever is purged of depravity,  
Well-established in virtues  
And filled with self-control  
And truthfulness,  
He is indeed worthy of the yellow robe.

Buddhism is not immune to the ignorances of extremism, and it, like all religions, can be weaponized and grossly appropriated to legitimize acts of terror. In the face of this atrocity, we aspire to cultivate the wisdom and compassion that is at the heart of the Buddha's teachings, and to manifest these virtues through our body, speech, and mind.

Condemnation of those who deem themselves

righteous in their heinous act is not enough. Each of our existence contributes to the external environment that creates and sustains other existences. We are not free or separate from those who have suffered at the hands of oppressors, nor can we liberate our existence from those we condemn. This interconnectedness of life is why shame sits in us, and why we are obligated to bring compassion to all sentient beings. Shame is inevitable, it will exist as long as we find ourselves part of humanity. May we use our shame to find compassion that belongs to all beings in the world.

Today, we dedicate our practice to the Rohingya Muslims who are currently facing displacement, violence, and death. Today, in this country, we are reeling from the mass shooting in Las Vegas. We also dedicate this service today to the 59 people were killed and 527 wounded in Las Vegas on Sunday.

We do not practice to make ourselves feel good. We practice to alleviate suffering wherever it exists, in our country and in other countries, in the Buddhist world and among all people, knowing that the suffering of one person is the suffering of us all.

We know that practicing together is a powerful way to heal ourselves, our society, and our world. Today we come together as a community with the aspiration to transform, in the spirit of openness, in the spirit of understanding, and in the spirit of peace.

Members of the HBC, unequivocally condemn the ongoing persecution that many have declared as "ethnic cleansing" and "genocide" of the Rohingya Muslim community that is currently being enacted in

## BEING A DISCIPLE OF THE BUDDHA

RUTDOW JIRAPRAPASUKE, MTS '18, NINA BRYCE, MDIV '19, AND  
ANH TRAN, MDIV '19

Myanmar. This atrocity is being committed in the name of Buddhism.

We offer this poem, written by Thich Nhat Hanh, to open our practice space together today:

*Recommendation - Thich Nhat Hanh - 1965*

Promise me,  
promise me this day,  
promise me now,  
while the sun is overhead  
exactly at the zenith,  
promise me:

Even as they  
strike you down  
with a mountain of hatred and violence;  
even as they step on you and crush you  
like a worm,  
even as they dismember and disembowel you,  
remember, brother,  
remember:  
man is not our enemy.

The only thing worthy of you is compassion -  
invincible, limitless, unconditional.  
Hatred will never let you face  
the beast in man.

One day, when you face this beast alone,  
with your courage intact, your eyes kind,  
untroubled  
(even as no one sees them),  
out of your smile  
will bloom a flower.  
And those who love you  
will behold you

across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.

Alone again,  
I will go on with bent head,  
knowing that love has become eternal.  
On the long, rough road,  
the sun and the moon  
will continue to shine.



Kristie Welsh

## BINDING AND LOOSING

LINDSEY FRANKLIN  
MDiv '18

*Lindsey Franklin offered this homily at the HDS Noon Service hosted by the Disciples and United Church of Christ Students on September 13, 2017.*



“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

On August 12, I stood in a church parking lot and watched a minivan unload its passengers onto the nearby street. The group all looked to be 17 years old, boys dressed in crisp white collared shirts. The car drove off, leaving the boys to organize themselves into a line formation as they walked carrying Confederate flags towards the nearby park. I was in Charlottesville with a bunch of Virginian clergy, preparing to stand in prayerful protest against the Unite the Right rally. While much of the horror of that day is worthy of reflection, there was something about that gaggle of white boys that struck me, the intimacy, the closeness, the coordination with which they moved together, a unit, matching haircuts and guns and khaki pants.

My belief that community is the antidote to loneliness -- and therefore much needed in the world-- is what drove me to divinity school. I believe that we continuously create one another as we build community with one another. We find God in one another. Our lives are spent trying to figure out who our people are, to whom we belong. If whatever we bind on earth is bound in heaven, it matters who we bind ourselves to.

And yet, as we bind to some we loose ourselves from others. Bound tightly to our people we can come to fear that liminal space where what we know meets the unknown. This fear can turn communities inward, ensnaring us with the obsession of who is in, and who is out.

When we allow our boundaries to become crystallized and blocked, our communities become calcified and stagnant. No air gets in. Fear and hate breed in that toxic water.

The chant I heard echo from the park that day still haunts me: "You will not replace us!" In this chant is this pernicious idea that community can be so fixed, so rigid that the space we take up as human beings is finite. That we can be replaced.

In this text, Jesus reminds us that communities are living, expansive, and like us, continuously in formation. There is always room in the kingdom of God.

For Jesus, boundaries are to be engaged directly, lived in, porous, allowing people in easily, through love, and out only through careful discernment. Always with the possibility for forgiveness and redemption.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIOR

AMY WESTON  
MDiv '20



*Amy Weston preached this sermon HDS's weekly Thursday Morning Ecumenical Eucharist on October 26, 2017.*

### **Romans 6:19-23**

I am speaking in human terms because of your natural

limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

### **Luke 12:49-53**

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

If you're like me and you have spent a lot of time in online communities, you probably know about the term "SJW." SJW stands for "Social Justice Warrior" and it is thrown about as a derogatory term for people—usually women and people of color—who are working to promote social justice and create safe online spaces for marginalized people. I've been called an SJW, in the same breath as being accused of conspiring to dismantle our society from the ground up. I get the impression that if he were around in 2017, stirring up trouble in online forums, the Jesus that Luke describes to us may also be described as a social justice warrior. And he is outspoken and disruptive in his critique of the status quo. "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you! But rather division!" What Jesus asks of us isn't easy, and it isn't always peaceful. He has sharp demands for those of us who live in peace and comfort thanks to the privileges we enjoy in our society.

For a lot of us, I think, this Jesus, the Jesus who proclaims doom and woe, who brings a sword, who divides families, who flips tables, he can make us uncomfortable. And sometimes we would rather just avoid these parts of his story altogether. But I think we can learn something, gain something, arrive somewhere when we dwell in this discomfort. Because when we let ourselves dwell in that uneasiness, we must ask ourselves the question: why does Jesus, our savior, whose sacrifice we commemorate here every Thursday, why does *he* make us uncomfortable? Sit with that for a minute.

For the past three days I've been in New Hampshire, with my family. Parents, siblings, cousins, aunts,

## SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIOR

AMY WESTON  
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uncles, the whole deal. My grandfather passed away over the weekend and we gathered for the funeral. And, a thing about my family that you may not be able to figure out from looking at me is that they love to party. Get us all together in one place and the beer and wine come out, the cribbage boards appear, the music starts, and we get loud. And it was just in one of these loud moments, as we were smiling and playing and enjoying each other's company that I heard in my uncle's booming voice, the punchline of an anti-Semitic joke, and a chorus of laughter in response.

When things like that happen, my first instinct—and I'll own this—is to perform an elaborate dance of justification in my head. Lines like “there's one in every family” or “he's not doing any harm here” soon start to sound hollow against the words of a Jesus frustrated with how comfortable and complacent we have become in our own cozy little niches in society.

Why *does* he make us uncomfortable?

Paul might give us a window into what's going on. And it's not an easy self-examination to swallow. Because why would the words of Jesus fill us with unease unless we were not accepting of their wisdom. We are beholden to the sins of our world: nationalism, racism, anti-semitism, transmisogyny, heterosexism. The list goes on. And when we see these things we let them slide because we are weary and at least for now things in our lives are peaceful and it's best not to rock the boat. Our lives are okay and we don't need to concern ourselves with righteousness—after all, sometimes speaking up isn't safe and sometimes it's better in the short term to be unscathed than to be righteous.

But that's not what God wants for us, and Paul points it out. We can't follow the sins of our society anymore. When we come here, when we participate in the sacraments and call ourselves Christians and proclaim ourselves to be followers of Christ, we commit ourselves to serve something else, something greater, something that demands that we put ourselves in harm's way, that we make ourselves uncomfortable, that we tremble against and resist the awesome power that the status quo has to grind us down, and this God, this presence, promises us that when we do that, we won't be alone, for in return we are sanctified.

And what happens when we resist? When we put ourselves in danger? I want to dwell on that idea of danger for just a moment because trans day of remembrance is coming up in just a few weeks. The trans community will gather to mourn those of us who have been murdered for simply existing in the world. And if your existence in the world is enough for that society in which you are placed to threaten your life, you start to gain a perspective that you would rather have the dangers in your life manifested along an axis of meaning which you get to define and not as part of a narrative of hatred that adds your name to a list that gets longer every year.

When we declare our intention to serve God, to negotiate the terms of our vulnerability in the light of Christ's demands for us and his real ability to enrich our lives and fill our communities, then we see that challenging our families is not an outrageous act but rather the first rung of the ladder. And that one by one as we call the institutions that claim



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ownership over us into question and declare our allegiance not to families or nations or flags but to God, as we kneel in humility before Christ and in protest against a nationalism that seeks to appropriate him for its own purposes, and as we array ourselves as social justice warriors, we slowly climb that ladder and find that beyond the division, beyond the injustice, when the dramas have played out, the peace of Christ, and the love of God, and the community of the Holy Spirit will be there, ready to accept us. Alleluia. Amen.

## PRAYER

AILEEN FITZKE  
MDiv '18



*Aileen Fitzke preached this sermon at the HDS Thursday Morning Ecumenical Eucharist on October 12, 2017.*

I Pray. I have great faith in prayer. Lately, in the wake of the mass shootings in Las Vegas there has been a backlash on the social media sphere, a backlash against prayer. My more secular friends ran with the backlash so that after the tragedy in Las Vegas my Facebook feed was just one article after another about the futility and ineffectiveness of prayer, one popular celebrity calling prayer as effective as “wishing on a star.” There

is even a video game that was developed last year in the wake of the Orlando shootings, called the Thought and Prayers Game, that believes it demonstrates the futility of thoughts and prayers in light of mass shootings. I understand the impulse for the backlash. Many of those who wield the phrase, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you” in the aftermath of mass shootings are often those who have the power to enact legislation to possibly prevent these tragedies, yet do nothing. It is the inactions that people take umbrage with. And perhaps it is because people believe that the phrase, “Our thoughts and prayers are with you,” may actually stand in lieu of any actual praying.

Our gospel today gives us the message that there is something to prayer. Jesus says, “Ask and you will receive: seek and you will find; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.” And here at the Divinity School we have a book, in which our intercessory prayers are written and will soon be read. Do we write our intentions and prayers there before Noon Service and before Thursday Morning Eucharist in spite of the futility and ineffectiveness? Or do we write them there because we do not think they are futile, that like Jesus in today’s gospel we believe there is something to prayer, that our prayers and intentions, shared with our community, and sent out to God, do make a difference?

Howard Thurman writes in his book, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, that intercessory prayer does two things. That the one who prays “sees more clearly how to relate himself to the other person’s need” and “that he may quicken the spirit of his friend to a sudden upsurging of the hunger for God, with the result that he is in the way of help from the vast creative energies of God.” And Thurman goes on to say “How this is done we may speculate but never explain. That it happens again and again in the religious experience of the race is part of the data of the prayer experience itself.” In other words, in Thurman’s experience, prayer is not futile but has been proven time and again to be effective. Thurman a poet, mystic, philosopher, theologian also worked in the civil rights movement, learned about and trained people in the actions of nonviolent resistance. For him prayer and action were intertwined.

So when we ask and receive, when we seek and find, when we knock and the door is opened for us, let us bring that Grace out into the world and act.

# HOLDING THE WHOLE PLACE UP

KERRY MALONEY

HDS CHAPLAIN AND DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

*Kerry Maloney preached this sermon at HDS's weekly Thursday Morning Ecumenical Eucharist on September 28, 2017.*

Readings: Haggai 1: 1-8; Psalm 149; Luke 9: 7-9

Last Thursday, Stephanie Paulsell told us that right before this liturgy, she was dashing home out the back stairwell of Andover Hall only to come across one of our student colleagues, a Buddhist nun, tucked up in the corner outside the Braun Room in meditation. "What if she is holding the whole place up?" Stephanie wondered. What if she is?

The image of that Buddhist monastic has been with me all week - as has another, Thích Quảng Đức. Quảng Đức was the first of many South Vietnamese monks to burn himself alive in the 1960's during one of that country's many viciously unjust regimes, not least, ours. Like anyone who was alive in those years, I remember the photo of his immolation *vividly* from my youth as well as the full film footage of his martyrdom shown to us by the nuns who were my teachers in those years.

Quảng Đức was protesting the persecution of Buddhists by his government, which was led at the time by Ngô Đình Diệm. The 1963 photograph of that monk seated in meditation fully aflame in a busy Saigon intersection both horrified and riveted the entire world. And caught its attention, at least for a moment. In an act of terrifying and serene resistance to oppression, Quảng Đức's self-immolation rose at once as an act of political protest and as a declaration of spiritual liberation. "We will not abide this repression," his martyrdom proclaimed, "and we will not finally be claimed by it either. You do not

own us." Quảng Đức's story was retold last week in Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's 8-part documentary *Vietnam*, which concludes tonight on PBS.

That documentary recounts an ancient, devastating, and depressingly familiar colonialist narrative. Tyrants rising to power on the backs of the poor. Smaller tyrants rising to the top of the oppression pile by crushing those beneath them. Bigger tyrants—empires—taking advantage of that power disequilibrium in places largely hidden from global view to play out their dirty proxy wars, in places of no ostensible account to the global economy but on which, it turns out, the global economy almost always utterly depends.

Think of the countries of Central America. Think of any number of African nations or those of the Indian subcontinent. Think of the Native nations that were wiped out and whose land was stolen to create the United States and the enslaved black and brown peoples whose labor made the wealth of our country. Think of Syria. Think of the Rohingya minorities of Myanmar. Think of Palestine, modern and ancient - all to one degree or another occupied, disposable, of no apparent account.

It's of little comfort to remember that tyrants and idols and fear have never been in short supply, in Jesus's time or in our own - and in all the time in between.

Whether their reach is great or small, they are the infamous or anonymous, from a named superpower or just a superstar in their own minds, *every* tyrant is petty; and wherever they set up shop, idolatry and fear are never far off.

# HOLDING THE WHOLE PLACE UP

KERRY MALONEY

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It's easy to spot them when they're right in front of us, like the characters that line up daily before us on CNN, like poor paranoid Herod - puny Roman tetrarch in a puny Roman province (son of that other paranoid Herod); but it's usually more difficult to spot them from the comfortable, privileged confines of Empire when they *are* us. At least it is for me.

Freedom from cruel and petty tyranny is the Lucan community's project, a project famously in line with the prophets of Israel. Release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free - this is the road map of the Way, the *Hodos*, of Luke's Jesus. The global economy at work in the Lucan narrative is a divine one that overrides and ultimately defeats all the reigning economies and tyrannies of the day. Now, as then, Jesus invites *everyone* - the tyrants and the tyrannized alike—to pick up our heads and to see just how free we really are. Even Herod seems to get it. Fearful as he was of Jesus and his growing crowd of followers, "He kept trying to seem him," the text tells us.

The reigns of terror in which we are all enmeshed and implicated - as tyrants or tyrannized or both - are all too real and all too deadly to make pretty metaphors this morning. I don't need to remind any of you that the stakes and the body count are just too high for that - from Ferguson to Kabul, from Nogales to Damascus, from Roxbury to San Juan. And make no mistake: moral equivalencies between those whose lives, like mine, are lived out in an Empire benefiting daily from colonialist white supremacy and those whose lives it continues to crush are patently obscene.

And yet. And yet the Gospel is still and ever *Good*

News. The global economy at work in the Lucan narrative is a divine one that overrides and ultimately defeats all the reigning economies and tyrannies and terrors of the day. Now, as then, Jesus invites *everyone* - the tyrants and the tyrannized alike (Herod *and* those he hunts) - to pick up our heads and to see just how free we really are. "You do not own us, any one of us," is the gospel truth. Here in this Eucharistic community, at this table, we proclaim with Paul that, "We belong to Christ. And Christ belongs to God." And, I pray, we mean it.

I daresay that *none* of us is a Quảng Đức. But that Buddhist monk outside the Braun Room last week—or any of the Christian "monks" *here*, around the table this one—might just be holding the whole place up. Maybe even the whole world.



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