

Reflections on Chaplaincy. Sermon, Marquand Chapel, Yale Divinity School

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Most loving and compassionate God, May the thoughts that have lingered in my heart now be spoken and heard in ways that will bring us closer to you and to all that you long for in us as your loving people. For this we say. Amen

First I want to thank you for inviting us to join you this morning. This is a particular delight because we see Yale Divinity School and this incredible worshipping community in Marquand Chapel to be such a gift to the world outside of these walls. You have inspired us in our work and you are often respite for us when we are fortunate enough to make it here for worship.

The Yale University Chaplaincy has a rich connection with the Divinity School and benefits greatly from the incredible interns who have served in our office over the years. Many Yale Divinity School interns have gone on to become some of the finest college and university chaplains in the country. I believe that every chaplain who has stood where I now stand is very proud of that fact.

When people think of the chaplaincy, they often think of how we are present in times of sorrow and tragedy. And we are, this is a given and it is an intimate privilege that we hold with tenderness and deep care.

Sometimes this presence is a very private walk with someone during the worst day of his or her life and sometimes it is a public presence with an entire community. One might also picture a pulpit-based ministry, one that is distinctly Christian in its orientation and focus nurturing a particular community of believers. And yes, that is an important part of the whole, but it is not the entire story. What I want to tell you about this morning is a different facet of the chaplaincy. Imagine that you are looking at an x-ray, getting a peek at the bone structure of what we do.

It is one that is fun to imagine but somewhat difficult to describe so bear with me. First, a confession, often, on any given day, I am not altogether sure “what” we are doing. It may sound crazy though, but I am almost always certain about “why” we are doing it. The “what” can feel like a mystery some days, we chaplains are often simply moving around chairs, filling up snack trays, buying crafts items for a retreat exercise or worrying if this week’s study break should feature grilled cheese or pancakes. Other days the “What” has substance that could be inspired by such things as worship planning for the University Church or working through the logistics of an Interfaith Day of Service.

Joan Chittister’s reflection on today’s gospel about the parable of the mustard seed thoroughly pulses through work of chaplaincy. It speaks in eloquently simple terms to why we do this work. She writes, “Life is a partnership with God. First, we must do our part; Then God does God’s part. There is nothing we do, therefore, that does not affect the future- whether we see it in our lifetime or not.” There are so many students who cross our paths, the planting is plentiful, the results remain mostly unknown and yet occasionally one gets a glimpse, a small peek into what grew. These mustard seeds are not of our doing, we do not create the seeds, we partner

with God in their planting and we care for the soil, we see to it that it is kept fertile and nurtured well for possibility.

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There is a large piece of butcher paper hanging in my office that reminds me everyday of what I hope we are attending to with the chaplaincy. It asks the question, "What makes an 'Inviting Tent'?" This is a question I asked of my colleagues when I first arrived in the summer of 2007. The question is inspired by the Jewish morning prayer which is said daily in most synagogues and it is from Numbers 24:5 "how fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel." I was attempting to bring to the surface their thoughts about what a chaplaincy could look like if people of all religious traditions or none were drawn to it and felt authentically welcome. I wondered if we really knew what it would take to be ready for this. We pondered the question honestly, naming our hopes along with naming what made us somewhat squeamish about the whole enterprise.

Some quick context to get you up to speed... In 2007 the Chaplain's Office physical space was in desperate need of a facelift. Our offices located in the basement of a very old building looked and felt like a somewhat dreary and uninviting place. We were going to get a sorely needed renovation, which meant that things were going to change and there was a great deal to consider. Not only was our space going to look drastically different, but in turn our program would too for we were committing fully to creating a space that was open and celebratory to all, yet privileged to none.

So here is what ended up on the butcher paper in an attempt to describe.... "What Makes an Inviting Tent?"

It is a place of trust.
There is softness, lightness,
place of ease,
there are warm welcoming faces.
It should feel safe, with many ways in and out,
You can come as you are,
the roof might leak,
it is never boring,
there is at times confusion,
a need for crowd control,
there is noise, place of rest, always hospitable,
it is colourful and the centre holds and the centre is strong.

In many ways this "Inviting Tent" if properly understood, acts as the soil awaiting seeds.

For the chaplaincy, for all of us in ministry, keeping the soil fertile for growth means getting one's hands dirty trusting that our efforts will have a part in realizing the reign of God and that this reign will at long last mean peace, justice and always love.

Tucked away, cozy in the basement of Bingham Hall on Old Campus downtown, there are seeds scattered everyday. We might not know what if anything will come of all this planting and spreading but occasionally we get little glimpses, small moments of magic that make us think, "Alright, something is happening here." Perhaps it is the Multifaith Council assembling weekly to share supper, asking thoughtful questions about each other's traditions and listening deeply to the

answers or it could be a gathering of students from across multiple campus communities coming together to work on Haiti relief efforts.

Something good is growing in and around this tent. I will never forget the late night study break during a Queer month celebration when members of the LGBTQ community alongside members of the football team enjoyed with glee the yummy goodness of fresh fruit dipped in a chocolate fountain. I looked across the room to a colleague and we just smiled at each other from ear to ear. This tent is rarely boring. Our couches make for comfy naps, offer a port in the storm for all and invite spirited conversation.

What kind of seeds are we planting? We are not planting seeds of relativism; we are not even really trying to plant seeds of unity. Remember, we didn't create these seeds; they are of God. This work is messy work, it is not without its edges and it is often misunderstood or appropriated in hurtful ways. We are planting seeds in hopeful partnership with God that inspire care, appreciation and warmth towards others and perhaps even love beyond what we could have ever imagined. They are seeds of possibility beckoning in many colours the reign of God.

Last semester, I received an email from a young Muslim student who I have come to know quite well since his freshman year. His name is Omar and he aspires to work in the field of public health with the poorest of populations in a developing country. He wrote to tell me how the chaplaincy had impacted his perception of the world. He grew up in a very sheltered environment and was taught by the Imam in his mosque to fear those who didn't share his same beliefs, to trust no one outside of his own religious community. His story is not unique; I have heard the same from time to time from Christians and Jews. People tend to fear what is unfamiliar, it is natural for us to feel ill at ease with what we do not know or understand. This student went on to say that those sermons of mistrust that he had grown up believing now felt quite farfetched and skewed from his actual lived experience since starting college. For him the idea of living in a religiously diverse setting no longer was seen as a point of separation, rather it was, a broader, truer idea of humanity and he embraced it. Omar then went on to describe the following: "In Islam, the idea of *nur* or divine radiance is often ascribed to those who exemplify sincerity and humanity. Many traditions speak of pious scholars and individuals who were recognized not so much by their physical characteristics, but by the *nur* that was manifest in their being. Students in search of knowledge would flock from different areas of the Islamic world to compete to be in the presence of these individuals, to have a portion of their light. The humble abode of the Yale University Chaplain's office, situated in the basement of Bingham Hall alongside empty classrooms and a laundry-room reveals nothing of the radiance that illuminates from it. The Chaplain's office has had a profound effect on my own spiritual growth and in formulating my views on humanity; it is that *nur* which has attracted me there almost every day these past two years." Hmmm, I think I'll add one more descriptor to the "Inviting Tent" list. *Nur*.

CLOSING BENEDICTION:

My sisters and brothers go from this place in peace, let us partner with God, let us get our hands dirty, cultivating the soil, planting the smallest of seeds with the abiding hope for the biggest of possibilities.