

Marquand Chapel
April 10, 2006

Carolyn J. Sharp

Psalm 51:1-12, Isa 42:1-9, Mark 14:3-9

Gracious and loving God, create in us clean hearts, that we may serve You with joy and confidence. Renew a right spirit within us, that we may not stumble or fall but may mount up with strength like eagles to do the work You have given us to do. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

If you're like me, you probably enjoy keeping up with the news from your college alma mater. The most recent alumni/ae magazine from my school, Wesleyan University, arrived a few days ago and I spent some time looking at what alums have been up to: someone was made senior Vice President of this organization, another chief counsel for that corporation, a third was executive producer of that famous recent film. I find myself appreciative of the rather different ethos of a theological school such as Yale Divinity, where our accomplishments tend to be more along the lines of... maybe ... understanding a little more about grace in a difficult ministry situation, or getting a parish to read a book of the Bible together over the course of a year, or helping some kids in a youth group to believe that they are important to God and to the Church. Divinity types don't generally tend to boast of landing plum jobs (if you doubt that, just watch the contortions bishops go through to express their humble willingness to serve, trying mightily not to do a little happy dance when they get the job). Divinity types should boast only in Christ, as we learn better how to humble ourselves before the boundless love of our God. Love should be at the center of who we are, here: we are a community seeking to understand God's love, to love God in return, and to love the world in God's Name. God willing, that is what will be told "in memory of us" long after our learning and our ministries are over in this place.

But memory is a tricky thing. What about when we don't agree on who we were or who we are becoming? In my Wesleyan alumni/ae magazine, a noteworthy dispute raged in the "Letters" section. An article had praised Wesleyan's historic and pioneering commitment to maintaining a diverse student body. One alum wrote in enthusiastically to commend the article's viewpoint. Another wrote in to complain that Wesleyan should stop "worshipping diversity" if the school truly wanted to thrive. A third objected that Wesleyan's commitment to diversity was not "historic" at all but was a recent development about which we should not be too smug; when he attended in the 1940's, women were still not admitted and he, a Jewish student, had been informed by the President of Wesleyan of a strict limit on the number of Jewish students accepted, something that was also true of Yale at that time, by the way. Each of the writers was earnest and cared a great deal about Wesleyan. Each had something important at stake in his witness about the goals that the community should serve. And yet their perspectives were so different. What are "community" and "memory" about, when they are so contested?

We may well ask that of ourselves. The mission of this place, Yale Divinity School, is to foster the knowledge and love of God, to equip students for ministry, and to proclaim the Gospel. We bear witness to that mission a hundred times a day, in our classrooms, in our worship, in our community work and parish internships. But what does that witness mean in such an

extraordinarily diverse community as YDS, where so many different goals and visions are at stake? Our Isaiah text for this morning can help us think about witness and service through diverse understandings.

Isaiah sings of one who has become known as the Suffering Servant. Since New Testament times, Christian tradition has re-heard the Servant Songs in the Book of Isaiah as prophecies of the teaching, suffering, and death of Jesus. This reading is a rich and profoundly meaningful way of hearing these prophecies, especially at the start of Holy Week. But we would do well to attend also to the resonances that were understood by the ancient Israelite communities of faith -- communities that acclaimed these words as words of truth centuries before Jesus was made incarnate. Was the Servant understood as a royal figure, as a prophet, or as the whole community of Israel, since Israel is also called God's "servant" a number of times in the Book of Isaiah? Strong arguments can be made for all of these possibilities. The mission of the Servant is fourfold: to bring forth justice, to be a covenant and light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, and to bring prisoners out of darkness. *Kings* established justice and freed prisoners, as indeed Cyrus of Persia did for the exiled Israelites in the time in which this Isaianic prophecy likely was written. But *prophets* opened the eyes that were blind, that is, illumined the understanding through communication of their prophetic vision. Yet again, *Israel itself*, as a people walking faithfully with God through time, knows God's covenant and offers that covenant relationship as a light to all other nations.

This diversity of possibilities for witness and service is embodied in God's chosen Servant, who has meant so much to so many. Each believing community has something unique and important at stake in its claims about the Servant and therefore, inescapably, about our own service to the God Whom we adore. What will they tell in memory of us, in memory of this community gathered to serve in *this* moment? Our own memories will all be unique and different from those of one another, ten years, twenty years from now. One person's feeling of painful alienation on a social issue may be met by another's memory of remarkable progress being made on that same issue. A community may celebrate the powerful ministry of a leader whose personal memories are, as it turns out, seared by the anguish of not having done enough.

What will they tell in memory of us? Whatever they do, I hope they will tell of us that we faithfully brought forth *justice* -- in whatever ways our hearts directed us, as best we could, even if we did not always agree on what that justice might look like. I hope they will tell of us that we were a light to the nations -- that some light got through, no matter how short we fell in our attempts to proclaim the Gospel and how insufficient were our attempts to welcome all into the loving embrace of our God. I hope they will tell of us that we opened the eyes of the blind -- however falteringly, that our lives and our convictions and hopes became translucent enough to the light of the Gospel that someone, somewhere, could see a little more clearly. I hope they will tell of us that we brought out from the prison those who were in darkness -- however you understand that darkness: whether the darkness of real prisons or the darkness of sin, the darkness of misogyny or racism or homophobia, the crushing darkness of political oppression or the suffocating darkness of poverty.

Our mighty God has declared to us a new thing: that those who serve God will transform all of creation through justice. Believe it, my sisters and brothers. Believe in this God Who still calls the people of Israel in righteousness, Who took the prophet Isaiah by the hand centuries ago and Who in these latter days has also given us Jesus Christ as a light to the nations. God calls you

this very day to bring out of prison those who are in darkness. What you do may or may not get printed in the alumni/ae notes of your college magazine. But I tell you, trust your vocation, serve God with all your strength, and seek God's truth in matters small and great. And generations to come *will* tell that in memory of you. In the Name of the One Who suffered, died, and rose again from the dead, Jesus Christ our Savior, to Whom be all power, glory, and honor now and forever. Amen.