

Welcome

Covenant

**LOVE IS THE DOCTRINE OF THIS CHURCH,
THE QUEST OF TRUTH IS ITS SACRAMENT
AND SERVICE IS ITS PRAYER.**

**THIS IS OUR GREAT COVENANT:
TO DWELL TOGETHER IN PEACE,
TO SEEK KNOWLEDGE IN FREEDOM,
TO SERVE HUMAN NEED,
TO THE END THAT ALL SOULS SHALL
GROW IN HARMONY WITH THE DIVINE.**

Opening Words

This weekend has been a reminder—for those who needed it—that teenagers often exhibit more moral courage than supposedly older and wiser adults. I thought we'd Begin today with another example. An article posted in October to Omaha.com relayed the following story:

Megan Erickson spotted another runner wobble, then fall onto the grass Thursday during the final stretch of a cross-country race.

The 18-year-old Erickson had promised herself that if a competitor needed help, she'd lend a hand.

Erickson did not waver.

“We're going to finish,” she told the fallen runner.

In an act observers called true sportsmanship, Erickson helped Emma Bixler cross the finish line during a district meet in the north-central Nebraska town of Ainsworth. Erickson's assistance has drawn attention on social media as an example of a young person doing the right thing no matter what.

With the finish line in sight, Erickson veered toward Bixler, a sophomore at Neligh-Oakdale High School who had fallen to her hands and knees from overexertion.

Erickson knew that she might be disqualified from the race for helping. Still, she reached down and lifted Bixler to her feet. Erickson put an arm around Bixler's back and guided her toward the finish line. But Bixler's legs kept buckling, and she fell again right before the finish line. Erickson said she couldn't manage to lift Bixler up, so she pulled Bixler across the finish line.

The article continues:

Under national rules for track and cross-country, both Erickson, a senior at Rock County High in Bassett, and Bixler were disqualified from the race.

[...]

Kristie Camp, who is Erickson's coach, said that if Erickson hadn't stopped to help, she likely would have finished in 10th or 11th place, automatically qualifying her as an individual for state.

Erickson said: "I know according to the rulebook, what I did was wrong. Morally, it was the right thing to do. I can't imagine just leaving her on the ground."

Our chalice lighting today will be familiar to most of you. It's the bridge from Bill Withers' song "Lean on Me," which we sing here occasionally. Megan Erickson is the literal embodiment of this song, someone who did the right thing even at cost to herself. As _____ lights our chalice, please join me in a responsive reading of the words printed in your order of service.

Chalice Lighting

You just call on me brother, when you need a hand.

We all need somebody to lean on.

I just might have a problem that you'll understand.

We all need somebody to lean on.

Prelude

"Learn to Fly," Foo Fighters

Time for all Ages

Not all vital assistance is as dramatic as what Megan Erickson did for Emma Bixler. Sometimes, those who aid us most are sitting just outside the spotlight. In his poem, *The Accompanist*, Dick Allen writes:

I've always worried about you—the man or woman
at the piano bench,
night after night receiving only such applause
as the singer allows: *a warm hand please,*
for my accompanist. At concerts,

as I watch your fingers on the keys,
and how swiftly, how excellently
you turn sheet music pages,
track the singer's notes, cover the singer's flaws,
I worry about whole lifetimes,
most lifetimes
lived in the shadows of reflected fame;
but then the singer's voice dies
and there are just your last piano notes,
not resentful at all,
carrying us to the end, into those heartfelt cheers
that spring up in little patches from a thrilled audience
like sudden wildflowers bobbing in a rain
of steady clapping. And I'm on my feet, also,
clapping and cheering for the singer, yes,
but, I think, partially likewise for you
half-turned toward us, balanced on your black bench,
modest, utterly well-rehearsed,
still playing the part you've made yours.

Hymn

"My Hero," Foo Fighters

Meditation

Not only might our heroes be ordinary, they might not even know they're helping us.
Today's meditation is a poem by Mary Szybist. It's called *Night Shifts at the Group Home*.

The job was easy: I tucked
them in, kicked off my shoes, listened for
the floor to go quiet. Everyone

slept except one: outside her door,
she paced, she hummed, holding
the edge of her torn

nightgown. Pointing, I told
her: to bed. Your bed. But she would not
stay there. She was old,

older than my mother: manic, caught
up in gibberish, determined to
sleep on my cot—

At first it was just to

quiet her. I could only sleep
if she slept, and I needed relief

from myself. That is how she
became a body next to mine
whether or not I wanted there to be

a body. She climbed
into my bed. I let her
sleep hot and damp against my spine.

All night she rocked, she turned,
she poked her spastic elbows
into my calves and slurred

her broken noises in the dark. All the old
fans went round in clicks
those summer nights—and she rolled

in bed and kicked
me in the head and I was
happy. No words, no tricks,

I just didn't love
my loneliness. My mind
felt cooler

with her there. Beside
her, I could have been anyone.
She had no word for me and not the kind

of mind to keep one.
And if she kicked
me, some nights, just

for the fun of it—who was I
to disappoint my one?
Sometimes I imagine I

was someone she won
at a fair as the wheel spun
under the floating, unfaltering sun

and clicked each lucky one

and one
until I was happily undone.

Musical Interlude

“Everlong,” Foo Fighters

Reading

In her poem *This Is Your Chance*, Jill McDonough writes:

English Composition at South Middlesex Correctional Center.
Julie reads out loud, and I praise her super thesis, then show
how her paragraphs veer away from it, just summarize.
And is she pissed! Too pissed to listen when her classmates try
to help. Amanda offers Act 2 Scene 1—“Now I do love her
too”—as evidence of Iago's state of mind. But Julie's
shutting down, frowning at her handwritten draft, writing
that took her weeks. *Hey Julie*, I say. Julie doesn't look up.
Says What. Says I hate this stupid paper now. So I say
Hey Julie. Amanda's helping you—write down
what she's saying. She says *I'm aggravated.* I think
they take classes on naming their feelings. I say *I know it*
but you need to pull it together, or you'll end up screwing
yourself. This is your chance. We're all quiet, breathing
together, willing her to break out of this. Then:
a little miracle. I look around the room and see
that everyone is beautiful. Each did something special
with her hair. *Hey*, I say, again. I say *hey a lot in prison.*
Hey wait a minute. What's up with everybody's hair?
Mabel got a haircut. Ellie's hair is long and black and gleaming
down her back, Amanda's in French braids. Julie's freshly
blonde, down to the roots. *You guys all look great!*
They laugh. They're happy I noticed.
Thank god I noticed; now, for a minute, we
are women in a room, talking about their hair. Julie says
Amanda did her highlights, and Sandy blew it out. *Good job, guys;*
she looks great. And then I say, *Julie. Look at you*
all pissed off over your paper when you're so lucky!
Look at all these good friends you have. Helping
with your paper, doing your hair . . . She nods.
She looks me in the eye, back with us, back on track.
I know, she says. *I need to work on my gratitude.*

Offertory

“Walk,” Foo Fighters

Sermon

It was a warm June night in 2015 when the Foo Fighters took the stage at Ullevi Stadium in Gothenburg, Sweden. The band was playing its second song when lead singer Dave Grohl misjudged a jump and fell into the security pit in front of the stage. He tried to stand, hoping to get back onstage, but his leg gave out. As Grohl later explained to *Entertainment Weekly*:

Our setlist...was supposed to be 26 [songs], and it was a beautiful night and there were 52,000 people, so I grabbed a microphone and I told everyone that I was going to fix it and come back. I didn't know if that meant in 20 minutes or a month, but I wanted to keep playing. They pulled me to the side of the stage and the doctor said, "Your ankle's dislocated and I have to put it back into place right now." They put this roll of gauze in my mouth and I screamed and bit down on it and they put my ankle back into place, and then everyone was quiet for a minute. The Foo Fighters were onstage playing a Queen song or something and I looked down and said, "OK, can I go back on stage now?" Because it didn't hurt. My paramedic doctor said "I have to hold your ankle in place," and I said, "Well, then you're coming on f—ing stage with me right now." And he did.

As his bandmates played a cover of "Under Pressure," Grohl was wheeled onstage and placed in a chair. With a paramedic named Johan holding his leg, Grohl finished the show. The band played for another two and a half hours.

Grohl's commitment to his fans and his desire for the audience to get its money's worth is admirable. But what interests me most here is Johan, the medic who sat on stage, securing the broken ankle to prevent further—and perhaps irreparable—damage. Like the Accompanist from Dick Allen's poem, he played his role, slightly out of the spotlight, the crucial piece of the show whose name nobody knows.

The band was lucky to have Johan there. He admitted later that he had long been a fan and he wanted to see the end of the show. There is no good time to dislocate your ankle, but sometimes you fall into the right people.

We have all dreamed, at some point, of being like Dave Grohl—a world-famous rock star widely regarded as one of the world's best drummers. Everyone imagines themselves as rich and famous. No one imagines being the paramedic holding the leg or the pianist behind the crooner. We see ourselves winning races, not being disqualified like Megan Erickson for helping our rivals.

Our society glamorizes celebrity. We put athletes and musicians and actresses on the covers of magazines. We watch award shows to see what the famous are wearing, but if one of the award recipients begins to thank her agent or publicist or personal assistant, the music starts to play because, as a society, we aren't big on gratitude. It's boring, and

it doesn't fit with our cultural belief in the brilliance of the Individual. We speak of history as a collection of heroic legends—Lincoln freed the slaves! Neil Armstrong walked on the moon! Ronald Reagan won the Cold War!

In reality, all of those achievements required the sacrifices and hard work of hundreds of other people.

Even in our own lives, it's easy to downplay the way others have helped us. We talk about the businesses we've made or the children we've raised or the art we've created without acknowledging the employees who made the businesses run or the neighbors who watched the kids when we had to work late or the other artists who showed us how to paint. We need to work on our gratitude. Your life, whether you're a rock star or a Doctor, was built by a crew of thousands, not just you. Often, those who help us are unknown to us.

The speaker in *Night Shifts at the Group Home* begins as someone who needs relief from her own loneliness. Through sharing a bed with a woman who can no longer take care of herself, she becomes *happily undone*. Emma Bixler finished a race because someone stopped to help her do so.

Or consider the roughly 40,000 travelers who were stranded in Canada on September 11, 2001, when the FAA closed American airspace. Airports where the planes in question had been forced to land were inundated with calls from Canadian citizens offering to open their homes for a then-unknown length of time to strangers in a bind. Those were particularly trying days, filled with uncertainty and grief and fear. Those are the moments when you want to be surrounded by people who care about you. Those ordinary Canadians provided more than just room and board. They provided something spiritual—empathy and love.

All of these people—indeed, all of us—owe so much to others, to people who were just doing their jobs, or who wanted to do the right thing, or who wanted human connection, or who, like Johan, just wanted to see the end of the show.

What does it mean to be—as this month's spiritual theme asks—a people of balance? I think of my son, who was born with a gigantic head. It took him longer to learn how to walk, because he couldn't find his equilibrium with such a humongous dome. He had to grow into it. (And he has. He's adorable!) But I think the first thing we have to realize, if we really want to be a people of balance, is that we can't let our heads get too big. We have to acknowledge what others have given us first. Only then, aware of our connection to and dependence upon others can we really get our footing.

The day after the broken-leg concert, the Foo Fighters posted an x-ray picture of Dave Grohl's broken leg on Instagram with the words, "Thank you, Gothenburg. That was amazing!"

Years earlier, they had released the song “Walk,” which says *I’m learning to walk again/ Where do I begin?* If you ask me, the first step is gratitude for everyone who has helped, and who will continue to help you move forward. Keep your head small. Remember those ordinary heroes. The Accompanist, the welcoming Canadians, the teenagers who made signs and got up early on a Saturday to do the work adults keep putting off. Remember that you can only become your best self with the aid of those others you’ve fallen into. And if you have a chance to be like Megan Erickson or Johan, for God’s sake, take it.

Closing Hymn

“Big Me,” Foo Fighters

Closing Words

I am eternally grateful that it is this congregation I fell into. If I said “There goes my hero…” every time I passed someone I admire here, I would never shut up. But I want to express my particular gratitude today to Tony Bonta. Every time we do a service together, I wonder if anything could ever be this good again. And the next time, it’s even better. Thank you also to Nick and Luke and Jon. I would hold your broken legs in place to hear you play.

Go now in peace, and be sure to express your gratitude to someone while you pass the peace in the foyer.