

(organ music) (fast-paced organ music) (congregation stirring) (organ music) (congregation stirring)
(somber organ music) (congregation stirring) (organ strikes chord) (angelic choir singing gospels) (organ strikes a chord) (choir singing gospels) (congregation stirring)

Pastor: Grace and peace to you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We welcome you to this service of worship at Duke University Chapel on this fourth Sunday in Lent and invite you to be with us again very soon. We are pleased to welcome as our guest choir this morning, the Burlington Boy's Choir under the direction of Miss Eva Wiseman who founded the choir in 1959. We have been blessed by their outstanding contribution to our services in the past and we look forward once again to their contribution to our worship today. Please note the other announcements as there are printed in your bulletins. Hear now these words of scripture, "Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you." (organ music) (choir singing) As the penitential season continues today in the life of the Christian Church may we in this place of worship turn our thoughts inward as we call on God to grant us mercy and pardon for our sin. Almighty God who by thy love has made us

- and through thy love has kept us, and in thy love would us make us perfect. We humbly confess that we have not loved thee with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and that we have not loved one another as Christ has loved us. Thy life is within our souls but our selfishness hath tendered thee. We have not lived by faith, we have resisted thy spirit. We have neglected thine inspirations. Forgive what we have been. Help us to amend what we are and in thy spirit direct what we shall be. That thou mayest come in to the full glory of thy creation. In us and in all men and women, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- Hear the good news, Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That is God's own proof of his love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.

- In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.

- Let us pray, the prayer for illumination.

- Open our hearts and minds, oh God, in this season of the cross so that as the word is read and proclaimed we might hear with joy what you say to us this day. Amen

- The first lesson is from Joshua, "And the Lord said to Joshua, "This day I have rolled away "the reproach of Egypt from you "and so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. "When the people of Israel were encamped in Gilgal, "They kept the passover on the 14th day of the month, "at evening in the plains of Jericho. "And on the morrow after the passover, "on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land:" "unleavened cakes and parched grain. "And the manna ceased on the morrow "when they ate of the produce of the land "and the people of Israel had manna no longer "but ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year." This ends the reading of the Old Testament.

- Will you stand and join in reading responsively the psalter. "I will bless the Lord at all times: "his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

- "My soul shall make her boast in the Lord: "the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad.

- "O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together. "I sought the Lord and he answered me "and delivered me from all my fears.

- "They looked unto him and they were lightened: "and their faces were not ashamed.

- "This poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.

- "The angel of the Lord encampeth round about him that fear him, and delivereth them.

- "O taste and see that the Lord is good: "happy is the one who takes refuge in him."

- The epistle lesson is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one "from a human point-of-view. "Even though we once regarded Christ from a human point-of-view we regard him thus no longer. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ "he is a new creation, the old has passed away. "Behold the new has come, all this is from God "who through Christ reconciled himself "and gave us ministry of his reconciliation. "That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself "not counting their trespasses against them "and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. "So we are ambassadors for Christ. "God making his appeal through us. "We besiege you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. "For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This ends the epistle lesson. (congregation stirring) (organ music) (choir singing) (organ music) (choir singing) (congregation stirring)

- A reading from the gospel according to Saint Luke, "Now the tax-collectors and sinners "were all drawing near to hear Jesus. "And the pharoses and the scribes murmured saying, 'This man receives sinners, and eats with them.' "So he told them this parable; "there was a man who had two sons "and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me', "and he divided his living between them. "Not many days later the younger son gathered "all that he had and took his journey into a far country "and there he squandered his property in loose living. "And when he had spent everything "a great famine arose in that country "and he began to be in want. "So he went and joined himself "to one of the citizens of that country "who sent him into his fields to feed swine. "And he would gladly of fed on the pods that the swine ate "and no one gave him anything. "But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough 'and to spare but I perish here with hunger?' "I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son. 'Treat me as one of your hired servants.' "And he arose and came to his father, "but while he was yet at a distance "his father saw him and had compassion "and ran and embraced him and kissed him "and the son said to him, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and before you 'I am no

longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him, 'and put ring on his hand and shoes on his feet 'and bring the fatted calf and kill it 'and let us eat and make merry, 'for this my son was dead and is alive again, 'he was lost and is found', and they began to make merry. "Now his elder son was in the field "and as he came and drew near to the house "he heard music and dancing. "And he called one of the servants "and asked what this meant and he said to him, 'Your brother has come and your father has 'killed a fatted calf because he has 'received him safe-and-sound.' "But he was angry and refused to go in. "His father came out and entreated him "but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you 'and I never disobeyed your command. 'Yet you never gave me a kid, 'that I might make merry with my friends. 'But when this son of yours came, 'who has devoured your living with harlots, 'you killed for him the fatted calf.' "And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me 'and all that is mine is yours. 'It was fitting to make merry and be glad 'for this your brother was dead and is alive. 'He was lost and is found.'" Here ends the reading of the gospel lesson. As the preacher climbs into the pulpit on a Sunday morning, she turns on the lectern light, clears her throat and prepares to deliver her sermon, God willing. Anxious to know just how many people did elect to cut-close the first few minutes of the ACC Finals on television in order to be here at the chapel. She looks out over the congregation and there, the inevitable sea of silence awaits her. She spots a 12 year-old boy brought to church against his better judgment. A bank vice-president known to have an alcohol-dependency, an unmarried college student terrified she may be pregnant. An impeccably dressed man who rumor has it, just left his family. The preacher invades the intimidating silence with an announcement, a reading from the gospel according to Saint Luke. The student leans forward, chin in hand. The bank vice-president neatly folds the bulletin and places it inside her purse. They all know the kinds of the things the preacher has told them before. Many of which seemed irrelevant at the time. But who knows what another sermon may bring. In the silence, they each await an answer, for they have come not only in their hopelessness but in their hopefulness that a word of truth might be spoken. And the preacher said, "There was a man who had two sons." A familiar tale to most of those gathered there. One woman remembered the thrill of seeing Baryshnikov dance Prokofiev's Prodigal Son at the Lincoln Center. Another recalled the Rembrandt etching she had once seen. And another recalled a rather unusual sermon she had heard preached on the text, from the perspective of the fatted calf. (congregation laughing)

And so the story unfolds. The younger of the two sons insists on receiving his share of the inheritance and the father actually gives it to him. "Is this to be taken as a new model of conflict resolution in the home?", a bewildered parent wonders. In a story full of extremes, the younger son gathers all that he has. Not just enough to tide him over six months or so, not just enough to get him to Tahiti and back. He gathers all that he has and he journeys into a far country. Where with characteristic abandon he spends everything. Behold, the younger son has to go to work or starve to death and so he gets a job on a pig farm. Quite an insult to the family name but not such a bad deal for the pigs, since he soon enough realizes they're getting a better deal than he is. Thus, the prodigal comes to himself and decides to go home. Not because he realizes he's made a fool out of himself and broken his fathers heart. Not because he indicates he's sorry for what he's done or that he's resolved to make amends somehow and do better next time. He decides to go home for the simple reason that he knows he always got three-square-meals a day there before and for a man in danger of starving to death that's reason enough. And so as he sets out on the return trip he rehearses the speech he has especially written to cajole his father into taking him back. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. "I am no longer worthy to be called your son. "Treat me as one of your hired servants." "That

ought to hit him where the old man lives", the young man thinks as he practices his inflection like Richard Burton preparing for King Lear. Just about the time he thinks he has it down the father spots him, coming down the long entrance into their grand estate. How many times, we wonder, has he stared blankly down that lonely road during those long months. Until that moment, perhaps he had not known what his reaction would be, but from the instant he lays eyes on that dearly beloved boy he has compassion on him, the kind that originates in your gut, as the New Testament word implies. It arises as naturally within him as air rushes in to fill any empty space. Before the son could even present his well-prepared speech his father throws his arms around him and all but knocks him off his feet. With tears and exclamations and incredulous laughter over his return. His son is back and that's all that matters, who cares why? The father does what no other parent in history would have been inclined to do. He doesn't say, "He hopes he's learned his lesson" or "I told you so." He doesn't say, "He hopes he's finally ready to settle down "for a while and will find some way "to make it up to the family." In an extraordinary display of love and graciousness, the father turns that cunning speech of the son into a moment of truth. The son is not to be treated as a servant but as an honored guest. In breathless succession the father heaps extravagant gifts upon the son: the best robe, a mark of high distinction, a ring, a sign of his authority and a fatted calf, in a land where meat is rarely eaten. And why not eat and make merry as the father proclaims? Turn on the music, roll back the carpet, break out the Champagne; for the son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found. This story, as much as any other I know, reveals the truly good humor of God, "For it seems that it's only when we hear the gospel as a wild and marvelous joke", in the words of Frederick Buechner, "that we even get it at all." For hearing it isn't really all that easy. Consider the elder brother, as an example. If God is preposterous, so is humanity as exemplified by this member of the family and his capacity for sin. It seems that no where is the deadliness of all seven of the deadly sins anymore unappealing than it is in the elder brother. Envy and pride and anger and covetousness are all present in full-force. Even sloth is there as he waits for his patrimony to gain interest, and lust, as he slavers over the harlots whom he's quick to point out the younger son has squandered his cash on. The elder brother is what Mark Twain called, "A good man in the worst sense of the word." He caricatures all that is joyless and petty and self-serving about all of us. But even here we detect a note of divine laughter and the joke's on all of us who know what it is to resent the presence of goodness. The father loves the elder brother in spite of himself. He always loved him and always will love him. Only, the elder brother never noticed it because it was never love he was looking for but only his due. The fatted calf, the Champagne, the ho-down, all could have been his too, anytime he asked for them. Except he was too busy cheerlessly trying to earn them and then resenting it when the younger son, whom he never called brother, became the grateful recipient. "The blind receive their sight. "The lame walk, the deaf hear. "The dead are raised up", Jesus said "and blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." Blessed is the one who is not offended that no one receives what he or she deserves but vastly more. Blessed is the one who gets the joke and enjoys the miracle. Most of us, I guess, are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of our blindness there is a great light. We're prepared to go on breaking our backs, plowing the fields without seeing, until we stumble on it, that there's a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy the State of Alaska. We're prepared for a God who drives hard bargains but not for one who gives as much for an hours work as for an entire day's. We are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than our little fingers but not for the giant redwood it becomes with birds in it's branches singing Mozart. We are prepared for the pot-luck supper at First Methodist, but not for the marriage supper of the lamb. In the words of Mr. Buechner, "It is the tragic which is understood to be inevitable." A given, an

assumption that won't let you down about the human condition. This is evidenced in more ways than we care to remember by the art work which has graced our chapel during this season of Lent. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from the tent of Abraham and the broken relationship between Sarah and Hagar. The rape of Tamar, Judas' betrayal, the Via Delaroso The crucifixion itself, the bombing of Hiroshima, all are depicted in disturbing even abrasive forms, to remind us of the bad news that must always come before the good news. We are all lost, whether or not we squandered our inheritance in loose living, or clung to it so fiercely as to lose our very souls. But for those who are willing to hear the good news as it breaks through the bad, there awaits an eternity of comic relief. They are often the people who the rest of the world wouldn't stop to ask the time of day. Themselves seen as bad jokes and misfits. They're the poor people, the broken people. The penitent people. The ones who are willing to believe in miracles because they know it will take a miracle to fill the empty place inside of them. Sarah knew what it would take to fill her emptiness. After 90 years of waiting and in the mean time watching jealousy devour her relationship with Hagar, her servant whom she once loved. So when the angel appeared and told her, "At last, she would deliver a child", she laughed and Abraham laughed with her because having used up all their tears they had nothing but laughter left. "While the tragic is inevitable, it is the comic which is unforeseeable", according to Buechner. Or at least it seems that way in the world. Whereas, the father may have imagined from the time his two boys were born, what he was in for. Sarah would never have predicted the intervention of an angel after all that she has failed to live up to. Yet as we all know, the ways of the world are not the ways of the kingdom of heaven. From the divine perspective, could it be, that it is the unheralded, the unlikely, the comic, which is bound to happen and not the other way around? If we really believe that God does impossible things with impossible children, we learn to expect the unexpected appearance of grace. Then let us join in the divine peel of laughter. Proclaiming the folly of Christ as our way of being, of doing, and of loving. Switching off the lectern light and gathering her notes now dampened by her sweaty palms. The preacher steps back to her seat. She has addressed her congregation with both a word of tragedy and of comedy because they are both a word of truth. She has spoken of God's visible absence because to fail to do so makes God's invisible presence less credible. Sin and grace, death and life, absence and presence, tragedy and comedy. They divide the world between themselves. Where they meet, is where we live and worship. For it is also the place where the gospel happens. Where God and all of God's people enjoy the last laugh together. Amen. (organ playing)

(congregation standing)