

(organ music)

- Grace and peace to you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We welcome you to the service of worship at Duke University Chapel on this 14th Sunday after Pentecost. We pray that you will receive a blessing during this hour. We also extend greetings to those of you in our radio and television audiences. Our preacher for this morning's service is the Reverend Dr. William H Willimon, Minister to the University. In your bulletin this morning you have received a card soliciting information about you, the worshipers, at Duke Chapel. If you would be so kind as to fill out this card and to drop it into the plate during the offering this morning, we would be most appreciative. Please note the other announcements as they are printed in your bulletins. Now let us continue our worship. (choir singing) (organ music) (assembly singing) O eternal God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may, in all things, direct and rule our hearts. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. One God, now and forever.

Amen.

- Let us pray.

All: Open our hearts and minds, O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit. 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 this morning is taken from Genesis. When Joseph's brother saw that their father was dead they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil which we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph saying, "Your father gave this command before he died. Say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I pray you, the transgressions of your brothers and their sin because they did evil to you.' And now, we pray you, forgive the transgressions of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are you servants." But Joseph said to them, "Fear not, for I am in the place of God. As for me, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today. So do not fear, I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he reassured them and comforted them. This ends the reading of the first lesson. (organ music)

Assembly: ♪ The Lord is my light ♪ ♪ The Lord is my refuge ♪ ♪ Of whom shall I be afraid ♪ ♪ The Lord is the stronghold of my life ♪ ♪ I will never be afraid ♪ ♪ When he people once tried to kill me ♪ ♪ It is they who stumble and fall ♪ ♪ The Lord is my light ♪ ♪ The Lord is my refuge ♪ ♪ Of whom shall I be afraid ♪ ♪ Though an army marches against me ♪ ♪ I will have no fear in my heart ♪ ♪ Though war breaks out against me ♪ ♪ Even then will I trust in the Lord ♪ ♪ The Lord is my light ♪ ♪ The Lord is my refuge ♪ ♪ Of whom shall I be afraid ♪ ♪ There is one thing I ask of the Lord ♪ ♪ For this only do I long ♪ ♪ To live in the Lord's house all my life ♪ ♪ To see the glory of the Lord ♪ ♪ The Lord is my light ♪ ♪ The Lord is my refuge ♪ ♪ Of whom shall I be afraid ♪ ♪ In the time of trouble ♪ ♪ I shall be safe ♪ ♪ I will hide in the shelter he sends ♪ ♪ I shall be lifted up ♪ ♪ Lifted high upon a rock ♪ ♪ The Lord is my light ♪ ♪ The Lord is my refuge ♪ ♪ Of whom shall I be afraid ♪ ♪ I

shall try and honor my host ♪ ♪ I will offer a sacrifice of joy ♪ ♪ I will sing a song ♪ ♪ I will sing praises to the Lord ♪ ♪ The Lord is my light ♪ ♪ The Lord is my refuge ♪ ♪ Of whom shall I be afraid ♪ (assembly singing)

- The second lesson is taken from Paul's letter to the Romans. One person esteems one day as better than the other, while another person esteems all days alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in his or her own mind. One who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord. One also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he or she gives thanks to the Lord, while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. None of us lives to ourselves, and none of us dies 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God, for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall give praise to God." So each of us will give account of ourselves to God. This ends the reading of the second lesson. The Gospel is taken from Matthew. Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother or sister sin against me, and I forgive him or her? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." Therefore the kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And as he could not pay, his Lord ordered him to be sold with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, "Lord have patience with me and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants and owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, "Have patience with me, I will pay you." He refused and went and put him in prison until he could pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their Lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant. I forgave you all that debt because you besought me and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. This ends the reading of the Gospel. (organ music) ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ O Judah, Rejoice! ♪ ♪ Rejoice, rejoice O Judah in songs divine ♪ ♪ With Cherubim and Seraphim harmonious join! ♪ ♪ With Cherubim and Seraphim harmonious join! ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ O Judah, Rejoice! ♪ ♪ Rejoice, rejoice O Judah in songs divine ♪ ♪ With Cherubim and Seraphim harmonious join! ♪ ♪ With Cherubim and Seraphim harmonious join! ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Rejoice in songs divine ♪ ♪ Harmonious join ♪ ♪ Hallelujah, Amen, Amen, Hallelujah, Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Amen ♪ ♪ Hallelujah ♪ ♪ Amen ♪

- During the past few weeks, in the rounds of receptions and convocations, as we've welcomed new students here, I've enjoyed asking people, "What lead you to Duke?" "My mother graduated from here," one

person said. "I like ACC basketball," said another. I hate to tell you faculty, but just about no one tells me they came here because of the superior faculty. But of course, absolutely no one told me that he or she came here because of the preaching, either. But nearly all, whatever reason they give, explain their presence here in terms of either a matter of choice or a matter of chance. Choice or chance. "I had three or four schools that I was interested in," one person said, "and I was going to look at Duke and Georgetown and Princeton. I came to Duke first, there was this snowstorm. I went to this party and I never got up to Georgetown or Princeton, so here I am." A matter of chance, or choice. "I was looking at three or four schools and I got them narrowed down, and I picked the one farthest away from my parents." Choice, choice or chance. And in our post-enlightenment age, to hear most of us explain our lives, that's the way we explain it, a matter of choice or a matter of chance. I remember when I was a student at Yale. They had to ask a number of distinguished professors to explain how they were in their chosen field of endeavor. And surprise, most of them said they didn't really choose it at all. It was a matter of luck. One distinguished professor, I remember, said that he was going to sign up for a zoology course, but the thing filled up before he got there so he walked across the hall to geology and he and he had been there ever since. The best selling book on college campuses a few years ago was by Rabbi Harold Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." Why do bad things happen to good people, Rabbi Kushner says, well it's mostly a matter of chance. There's this great roulette wheel of life and when certain numbers come up bad things happen to you, and when certain other numbers come up good things happen to you, that's the way life is. Nobody means anything by it, it just happens. Choice or chance. On the other hand, many of us moderns enjoy thinking of ourselves as choosers of our fate. "My life is the sum of my choices, my life is what I decided to be. I decided to go out for football, I decided to go to this university, I chose this person for my wife." We mold our lives through our choices. Choice or chance. And yet, what would you say if I suggested to you today that you are here today because God meant for you to be here. That you are here today because God means it that way. Not just here at Duke, or even here in the chapel, but here in your life. That in your life there are plans and purposes and directives being worked out. That there is this hand busy in you. Now I have no way to demonstrate the truth of that assertion except to tell you a story. And it is a long complicated story. The story of Joseph and his brothers. It is today's first lesson from Genesis. And we're coming in towards the end of this long story, so we're sort of slipping in to the theater during the last act of the play. Today's first lesson is a segment from the end of the story of Joseph and his brothers. Their father, Jacob, has died. And now the older brothers tremble lest now that the old man is gone, little brother Joseph turns and repays them for all the nasty things they did to him. But Joseph attempts to put their minds at ease. Fear not, Joseph says, you meant it for evil. But God meant it for good. If you read the whole story of Joseph and his brothers, beginning some twelve chapters earlier in the book of Genesis, you would see why Joseph's brothers had good cause to fear little brother Joseph. He was one of his father's last children. Father Jacob loved him from the first with an unashamed favoritism. Little brother Joseph, but I tell you, it was those dreams that really got them. Imagine your little brother coming down to the breakfast table in the morning and over corn flaked telling you, "I had the most wonderful dream last night." "Really?" "Yes, we were all out gathering wheat in the fields, and when we gathered up the sheaths of wheat all of your sheaths bowed down to my sheath." "Really?" "Yes, and then I had this other wonderful dream. I dreamed I was the moon and there were these eleven stars and all these eleven stars bowed down to me and worshiped me." "Really," said the eleven brothers. Well, we're gonna give him something to dream about. "I wonder what Freud would say of my dream," little brother Joseph said. And their chance came one

afternoon when the father sent Joseph out into the field, where the brothers were working, he sent them out with their lunch. He didn't want little Joseph to do any hard work, it might get his hands dirty. He sent him out with their lunch. And when they saw him coming they said, "Let us do in this dreamer of dreams." And they threw him down into a pit, meaning to leave him there. But they thought better about it, and they pulled him back up and they sold him to a group of Ishmaelite slave traders on their way to Egypt. And they got home and they said, "Dad, the worst thing happened today. Guess what ate Joseph?" But Joseph always managed to land on both feet. He got to Egypt and he impressed Potiphar, a chancellor of the Pharaoh, with his intellect. And Potiphar didn't treat him like a slave. He put him in charge of many responsible projects. Unfortunately, Mrs. Potiphar noticed Joseph's other attributes. And she demanded that Joseph, one evening, but you're not interested in that part of the story. (assembly laughing) Mrs. Potiphar lied and Potiphar was enraged and he threw Joseph into jail, but even in jail he continued to interpret dreams. And one day he interpreted a dream of the Pharaoh that nobody else could interpret, that there was going to be a great famine in Egypt. And the Pharaoh was so impressed he brought him out of prison and put him in charge of the Egyptian welfare program. And in the midst of this famine, guess who should show up in Egypt looking for food? The brothers, and they did not recognize that this powerful Egyptian official was none other than little brother Joseph. Eventually, Joseph reveals himself in this tearful scene. And when he did, the older brothers figured that they were done for. They remembered the pit, and the slave traders, and the prison. But Joseph said to them, "Fear not. You meant this for evil, but God meant this for good. So that many might be saved from hunger." Their attempt to put Joseph to death had been used by God to preserve his chosen family. They meant it for evil, God meant it for good. And for a few thousand years, people have loved to tell this story of Joseph and his brothers. And if we had the time and the honesty to tell our stories, my story, your story, I bet that they too would be long and complicated. Full of twists and turns and setbacks. And if we could tell our story with so unflinching realism and honesty as the story of Joseph and his brothers. Oh, because you know that whenever we look at our lives, we can be counted on to engage in a great deal of cover up if not downright deceit about who we are and from where we have come. We grew up in a loving, adoring family with fair and just parents, adoring brothers and sisters. It was Ozzie and Harriet and David and Little Ricky and Ward and June and the Beaver. That's where we came from. But the Bible doesn't tell stories like that. The Bible is true. The Bible knows that here is a story of a real family. A family more like the one that you and I really grew up in, if we had the strength to tell it. For in any family, even the very best of families, there is always this confusing mixture of competition and struggle and unfairness and injustice and the threat of violence. Home is not just this alleged haven in a heartless world, but home is also the place where love and hate get mixed. There is the sideward glance and the downcast eyes. There is this anger that bubbles up out of nowhere and rage mixed with popcorn by the fire and presents around the tree. This is home too, and you wonder sometimes looking back how anybody makes it out alive. You see what I'm pointing to is that even in the best of families and even in the best of lives, there's always these twists and these turns and these setbacks and these things that you wish weren't there. And why is it that sometimes the people who love you the most, hurt you the most? And you, they? And the one who is your brother is also the one who can cast you into the pit. It's a true story. And yet, it is also a story about certitude in the midst of real life. You meant it for evil, God meant it for good. A story which began with resentment and betrayal and violence turns out, by the end, to be a story about the preservation of God's people. There is something, some deep, loving presence behind the pages of this story. There is some hand, there is some author who is greater than the individual actors. Greater than the brothers' guilt and evil

deeds. The dream lives. We find out that God's busy dreaming too, and God's dreams are not stumped by the older brothers' resentment. The hero of the story is not bratty little brother Joseph; the hero of the story is God. For there is an author of another plan that makes this story eternally worth retelling, a plan hidden but sure. Joseph tells his brothers, "You meant it for evil, God meant it for good." God's plans triumph. We're not told how they triumph, even the Bible doesn't do that. We are simply told that they do triumph. "God," says Luther, "can shoot with a crooked bow or ride a lame horse." We're so accustomed to thinking of life as a matter of choice or chance. Life is what I do, what I decide and choose it to be. Or else some roulette wheel, a matter of sheer luck. Is that why we so often feel so helpless and hapless in the face of life's difficulties? Because we're at least smart enough to know that if life is all left up to us, then we are without hope. Modern people like to think of ourselves as so powerful and so able to change the world, but what we get for that is this terrible paralysis which sets in when we know that to really be a lie. If the fate of the world, if the outcome of the future is solely left up to us, then a good freshman course in Western civilization will let you know we are doomed. No wonder we feel frail and frightened in the face of the bomb and AIDS and thinning O-Zone and even exams, because if it's all left up to us, I mean, we know the story. But Joseph, by the end of the story, is able to look back on all the strange twists and the turns and the heartache and the setback and proclaim, "Fear not, you meant it for evil, but surprise, God was busy meaning it for good." Now I'm not talking about the silly notion that everything that happens in this world happens because God means it to be that way. Rather, I'm talking about the amazing resilience of God's purposes for the world. God's intent for the world isn't stumped by the older brothers. Augustine, at the very beginning of his immortal City of God, had to face a tough question. Why was it when the barbarians sacked Rome, that Christians suffered just as much as pagans? Specifically, he had to come to terms with the violent crime of rape. Augustine's first answer is, we can be thankful that the barbarians were at least exposed to Christianity, or pagans and Christians would have suffered worse. But as if he knows that doesn't quite get to the heart of the matter, Augustine says that Christians are distinguished, not by what happens to them, but by how they respond to what happens to them. In a memorable passage, he writes, "For even in the likeness of our sufferings, "there is an unlikeness in the sufferers. "And though exposed to the same anguish, virtue and vice "are not the same thing. "The great difference between human beings "is found not in what ills they suffer, "but in what kind of persons suffer the ills." Christians differ not in what happens to them, but in the fact that they respond in faith that God is there. Calvinist, though I am not, I think I do believe in a kind of predestination. But only in the backward look. That is, while I sure don't believe that everything that happens in this world happens because God wants it that way, there's still too many older brothers around to believe that, I do believe that sometimes when you look back on your life, even the worst of it, the twists and the turns, the setbacks, it is amazing how well it fits. It's as if there was this hand, an overriding purpose, as if some divine intent were there. As if God meant it to be. Oh, the people who told this story first were not so naive about the facts of life as to take some Pollyanna-like view that, well, it all just works out somehow. No, what they wanted to say was that when it is all said and done, God has the last word in human history. God really is busy in your life, in ways you have yet to comprehend. Later, Saint Augustine commented that when you look back on your life, and you think about where you are, at first glance, looking at your life is like looking at a muddy chicken yard full of chicken tracks, you know little chicken tracks in the mud going this way, that way. No pattern, no meaning, no direction. But seeing through the eyes of faith in a God who is there and who means something. Surprise, your life starts to take on pattern and meaning and coherence. And it's that point that you agree with Saint Paul. In everything, God works for good, with those who love

him, who are called according to God's purposes. Amen. (organ music) (assembly singing)

- The Lord be with you.

Assembly: And also with you.

- Let us pray. O Eternal God, from everlasting to everlasting, the Alpha and the Omega of this vast universe, we worship thee. Thou hast created each of us as a unique stripe in the fabric of humanity. Yet we remember the bond which unites us with our sisters and brothers around the world even in our diversity. Hear now these prayers, offered for the entire human family, as we acknowledge our oneness with thee. Let us pray for all poor and neglected persons, the homeless the unemployed, and destitute, the sick, the dying, the hungry, and the forlorn. Nourish their souls and comfort them with thy healing presence. Inspire in each of us the manner of Christ own ministry to those who suffer. Let us pray for all who live in the midst of injustice, terror, disease, and death. Look on them with compassion, merciful God, and strengthen their faith. Inspire us all to continue in our struggles for justice and truth. Teach us to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, but to work together with mutual forbearance and respect. May we become a truly reconciled people, even with those whom we call our enemies. Let us pray for all those charged with the responsibilities of governance, grant all those in authority the wisdom and the strength to know and to do thy will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness and make them mindful of their calling to serve with integrity. Let us pray for all who feel unloved or unwanted, for those who seek to harm themselves or others, for those who indulge in material excess, attempting to fill an interior void. For those who live within institutions, surrounded by people yet lonely beyond words. Heal these, thy children, O God, that they may know the unique worth thou hast bestowed upon them. Let us pray for all who face new beginnings, and especially for the Class of 1991, and those charged with the responsibilities of leading them. Remembering any who live with anxiety, fear, or self-doubt, we pray for a renewed vision of thy purpose in their lives and a reassurance of thy unfailing love and acceptance. Deliver to their sides, O God, good friends and wise counsel. These prayers we lift unto thee, Almighty God, hope of our world, trusting in thy eternal goodness, grateful for the guidance of thy sure hand in our lives. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen. And now in the spirit of Thanksgiving, let us offer our gifts and ourselves unto God. (organ music) (choir singing) (organ music) (choir singing) O everliving God, we offer unto you our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the wonder of life and for the mystery of love, we thank you for the blessing of family and friends and for the loving care that surrounds us on every side. We thank you for setting us at task, which demand our best efforts. And for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us. Above all, we thank you for your son Jesus Christ, for the truth of his word and the power of his resurrection, through which we are raised to the life of your kingdom. And it is in His holy name that we are bold to say

All: 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 as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen. (organ music) (assembly singing)

- And now may the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you now and always. (choir singing) (fast organ music)