

(beautiful organ music)

- Good morning and welcome to Duke Chapel. We're glad that you're with us. We welcome as a special soloist today, Dr. Eric Meyers. In honor of the Jewish High Holy days, our choir is singing a selection from Ernest Bloch's Sacred Service. By the way, the choir will be singing this service in its entirety next spring with Dr. Meyers as cantor. Remind you that you're invited for coffee and conversation immediately after the service in the Page Art Gallery and we hope you'll join us for that. And now let us continue our worship.

(choral singing)

- Remembering that we have failed God and one another, let us turn to number 723 in the back of the hymn book, and seated make our confession to Almighty God. Have mercy upon us, oh God according to thy loving kindness. According to the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out our transgressions. Wash us thoroughly from our iniquities and cleanse us from our sins, for we acknowledge our transgressions and our sin is ever before us. Create in us clean hearts, oh God, and renew a right spirit within us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen. Hear the good news. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That is God's own proof of His love towards us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Crowd: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

- Let us pray. Open our hearts and minds, oh 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 is taken from the book of Ezekiel. The word of the Lord came to me again. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel? The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine. The soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine. The soul that sins shall die. Yet you say the way of the Lord is not just. Hear now, oh house of Israel. Is not My way just? Is it not your way that is not just? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity he shall die for it. For the iniquity which he hath committed he shall die. Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed, and does what is lawful and right, he shall live. He shall save his life, because he has considered and turned away from all the transgressions which he has committed. He surely shall live. He shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says the way of the Lord is not just. Oh house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? Therefore, I will judge you oh house of Israel. Everyone according to his ways says the Lord God. Repent and turn away from your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart, and a new spirit. Why will you die, oh house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in death of anyone, says the Lord God. So turn away and live. This ends the reading of the first lesson.

- The reading from the Psalter is number 562 in the back of your hymn book. Please stand. To thee, oh Lord, I lift up my soul. Let me not be put to shame. Make me to know thy ways, oh Lord. Lead me in thy truth and teach me. Be mindful of thy mercy, oh Lord, and of thy steadfast love. Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions. Good and upright is the Lord. He leads the humble in what is right. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness. For thy namesake, oh Lord. Who is the one that fears the Lord? The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear Him. May integrity and uprightness preserve me. (uplifting organ music) (choral singing)

- Our second lesson is taken from Paul's letter to the Philippians. So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy, my being of same mind, having the same love. Being in full accord of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves, lest each of you look not only to his own interest, but also to the interest of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. Being born into the likeness of man, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient even unto death. Even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name. That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in Heaven and on Earth and under Earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. To the glory of God, the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. This ends the reading of the second lesson. The gospel is taken from Matthew. What do you think? A man had two sons and he went to the first and said Son, go work in the vineyard today. And he answered, I will not. But afterwards, he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same thing. And he answered, I go sir. But did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? And they said, the first. And Jesus said to them, Truly, I say to you the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the ways of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him, and even when you saw it, you did not afterwards repent and believe. This ends the reading of the gospel. (choral singing)

- As I ponder what to preach to you each Sunday, only rarely does some word leap from the Biblical text and grab me by the throat, shake me up and down and demand to be preached. And such was the case today. When I looked over the assigned lessons for this Sunday, nothing caught my attention, until I looked at the assigned Psalm for the day, and I read the phrase: Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions. According to thy steadfast love, remember me. And I was hooked. It was too good a phrase to let pass in a university chapel. Remember not the sins of my youth. What an evocative phrase. Remember not the sins of my youth. And what are these sins of the youth for which the psalmist begs divine amnesia? Sins of the youth. I see smoke filled rooms, sleazy dives down by the railroad station known as Sam's Bar and Grill, all night binges followed by aching head. Road trips to descents into Hell to God knows where. "Animal House" redone in Durham. Encounters in the backseats of Chevrolets. Sins of the youth. About the age of a Duke Sophomore or Junior, Saint Augustine who spent the rest of his life paying back God for debts incurred

during youthful degradation, Saint Augustine prayed Oh God, make me chaste, but not yet. (laughter) For this he was voted the patron saint of all college students. Sins of the youth. Every year during the chapel choir's presentation of Handel's Messiah there is that point in the Messiah when a boy soprano steps forward and sings of corruption. He suffered not corruption. He suffered not corruption. I, with Ben Smith, have often wondered what does he know of corruption? What does an 11 year old know of such things? Let him come back when his voice has changed and he's a Duke Sophomore and then he can speak of corruption with personal conviction. Sins of the youth. Speaking at a little college somewhere out in the Midwest in a town so small it didn't even merit a dot on the map, I wondered aloud, what on Earth do they do here for entertainment on the weekends? Oh preacher, don't even ask said the chaplain. Every person over 10 or 12 has some secret room somewhere. Some trunk hidden in the attic or casket buried deep in the basement of the soul. Closed, dusty, cluttered with dark moments. Memories we would as soon forget. And the older you get the more memory you have to forget. The more you have to put into that trunk, that secret room, that grave. The older you grow, the more you have to forget. What is remorse, but bitter memory? And what is guilt, but accusing memory? I know that in my counseling with people the most frequent kind of pain with which I come into contact is suffering brought on by memory. I mean, for what do you think we have this nervousness, this sleeplessness, this tossing and turning, this drug taking, except from the feelings of fear and anxiety brought on by memory too painful to bear. Oh, we fill our rooms with trophies, and we hang diplomas on our walls, and we frame pictures and we wear class rings, and we put up blue ribbons of good memories. But deeply hidden from public view, in the cellar of the soul is where we stuff the memories too painful to remember. We handle undesirable memories by attempting to forget them. Let's agree just to forget about it. Let's both act as if this never really happened. Why dwell on the past? What is done is done. Let's talk about something more pleasant. Remember not the sins of my youth. But bad memory unremembered pushed back into the secret place of ourselves can do much harm, because the unconscious has no digestive tract. It's not as if we can just swallow hard on our bad memories and be done with them. I mean we've tried to do that time and again as a nation. We've tried to just forget about past national traumas and we've tried to do it as individuals. But when we try to forget painful memories, we often become strangers to ourselves. Having cut our history down to just what is pleasant, and manageable and cheerful. We don't know ourselves. As Henri Nouwen says, "To try to live our lives without memory is to turn our back on our best teacher." We cannot reduce our history to the stuff of daydreams and live out the nightmares. Oh we wish that we were over and done with our past, but our past is never over and done with us. Not yet, we're not the escape artist we wish we were. Oh we chatter, we make jokes, we turn on the radio, we take a drink, we try to live just for today. But then, just when we think we are cut loose, there is that face, that sideward glance or some snippet of an old tune long since played out. And we remember. And we wish to God that we could forget. A while back, I was accosted by an alumnus of my college. We were students there together, and knowing that I am now a trustee of the place, he sought to collar me. Today's students are a disgrace, he said. You know what is going on in the dormitories of our college? I tell you, you trustees should stick by your guns, and you should tell them to shape up or ship out. You ought to tighten things up. Unfortunately for him, my memory had not been so dulled by the years. Apparently I remembered his past better than he. (laughter) And I said to him, Tighten the rules? It seems that I remember when we were there there were strict rules against dormitory visitation by members of the opposite sex. He said yes, and there ought to be today. And I said, well I do remember a certain evening in April of 1967, or was it April 1968 when someone down the hall from me had a visit from someone of the

opposite? He wished to God that I had forgot. I know in seminary, it never failed. The person, the chief radical, the chief theological radical on the hall, the one who was always ranting and raving about these stupid conservatives, these backward fundamentalists was always a former fundamentalist himself. He was raving and raging against his own background, his own roots, his own memory. At my high school reunion, with the band belting out oldies-but-goodies in the background she asked, You weren't always planning on being a preacher, were you? I mean you weren't thinking about it back in high school, were you? And I said, no I don't suppose I was. Why do you ask? Good, she said. That at least makes me feel much better.

Remember not the sins of my youth. Remember not, not just the things we did on Saturday night, but what we did all week long. Remember not the way we treated our parents, and the people, the people whose names we can't even recall, whom we offended by thought, word and deed. By things left undone, and by things done. Dare we to remember, even for a moment, and to admit to the truth of the ancient words of confession. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. There is no health in us. We are not worthy to be called thy children. And maybe that's why we always begin the service of worship with a prayer of confession, because there's so much we need to forget to get in here. We wish to God that we could forget, and I hate to tell you, but wishing that you could forget is certainly not over and done with when you're 21 or 31, you've just begun to want to forget. If children must yearn for their parent's forgiveness, how much more ought parents to yearn for their children's forgiveness? Because some day every parent looks at his or her grown children and thinks not look at all that I've done for you. But thinks look at all I've done to you. How can there ever be enough forgetfulness to go around? A student said of his younger sister now in her second year of therapy, chemically dependent in misery. If she could only learn to forgive our parents for what they did to her or they didn't do to her. If she could only learn to forget. He hoped that the therapist would help her to remember in order that she might then forget. And if we yearn for the forgetfulness of other people, how much more ought we to yearn for the forgetfulness of God? As another Psalm asks, Oh Lord, if thou should count our iniquities, God who could stand? If God is omniscient, omnipresent, all-knowing and all-wise, think of the suffering that God suffers because of us. I mean, at least eventually many of our old wounds heal. If you live long enough, amnesia sets in. And we achieve, therefore, a kind of relative peace. I can't even remember what I had for lunch yesterday, much less whom I offended. But God? If God remembers everything, God must suffer terribly. I mean, you wonder how in the world God can endure the silence of the universe. If God can still hear the cries of Hiroshima, if God still remembers the agony of Auschwitz, if God can still hear the prayers of the Battle of Hastings, and on the field of Waterloo, and last moments, unkind thought, or deed of meanness, how can God stand it? Does God have the alleged memory of an elephant? Smith? Isn't that E. Smith? Yes, let's see. Gabriel, bring me the file on E. Smith. Lord, who could stand? Jesus meets the woman at the well, and the woman says something about my husband and Jesus says I believe you've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now is not your husband. And she ran back to town and said come see a man who told me everything I've ever done! And so it is in this context that the Psalmist prays remember not my transgressions. Remember not the sins of my youth. Forget it. We wish to God that God would forget. Someday each of us stands before our father, our mother, and looks into their eyes and sees reflected back our youth. The demands we made, the unkind words we spoke, the ways we disappointed, and the ways we hurt without even trying to hurt. And we silently ask for their forgetfulness. Their forgiveness. And someday, each one of us must ask for the same forgetfulness of God. Remember not. And will God forget? I mean, you could observe our delight in remembering, recalling, recollecting somebody else's sordid past. What if God's like that? Smith? Is that E. Smith? That's E. Smith,

the banker, isn't it? Oh, no, if memory serves me correctly, I think it's E. Smith the philanderer. Citizen of the year? Oh well, I do think I remember some little trouble with the IRS sometime ago. Presidential candidate? Wasn't there something back there about some law review article something? Look at how we delight in remembering not only the sins of youth, but of middle age and any other age because our remembrance is a way of keeping people pinned down and tied to their place. A way of putting and keeping others where we think they ought to be. Oh they may try to break free. They may try to cut loose, but as long as we remember, they're done for. They are always enslaved by our remembrance. One day Thomas Aquinas was lecturing to some of his students on the greatness, the omnipotence of God, and after he finished the lecture, one smart aleck raised his hand and said Doctor Aquinas, is there anyway in which God is limited? And the great teacher said yes. And there was a shocked hush in the class. Yes, he said. Even God Almighty cannot make the past not to have been. I mean, even God can't do that. What's past is done, and what's done is forever. No wonder the Psalmist prays against divine memnasis and prays for forgetfulness. I'll tell you who you're real friends are. A friend is someone who knows you, who remembers you, perhaps better than even you remember yourself, but who doesn't remember. Friends are those who discretely forget, before whom certain things don't have to be dredged up, certain things don't have to be recollected. For the sake of love, they forget. A friend is someone who forgets what you've done in order to remember who you are. Remember not the sins of my youth. Remember me. Isn't that what each of us really wants from God when it's all said and done? That God will love us enough to forget what we've done and left undone in thought, word and deed in order to remember who we are. On our knees with outstretched, empty hands, that's what we want. It is this divine forgetfulness which is called forgiveness in scripture. The greatest mercy we want from God is to forget in order to remember. Smith? Is that E. Smith? Gabriel, forget the file. I remember him. I remember. Hanging on the cross, one thief mocked Jesus. The other thief said, man don't you fear God? We deserve what we're getting but He doesn't. And then the thief said, Jesus, remember me. Remember not the sins. Remember me. It's the last deepest prayer we utter. A couple of Psalms later, the Psalmist says, if my father and my mother forget me, Lord you'll take me. Remember not the sins of my youth. According to thy steadfast love, remember me. Amen. (uplifting organ music) (choral singing)

Rev. Noren: The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, our Father with the tender love of a parent, would draw all Your sons and daughters to Yourself. Give to all who seek You open and trusting hearts to respond to Your gracious word. We pray for all who are hindered from knowing the fullness of Your love because of fear or bondage to memory or cynicism or half-heartedness and we pray Your forgiveness when we have reinforced or justified those barriers in other's lives. By the power of the risen Christ, reconcile them and us to Yourself. God, our ruler, You behold all nations of the world and know their pain. Their longing for peace. Their mistrust of one another. Deliver us from pride and selfishness in our dealings with one another. Give to our president and to the leaders of all nations wisdom and strength to do Your will. Fill them with the love of the truth and righteousness which come from You. Comfort and sustain all who live in places torn by war and unrest. Let Your kingdom come, and Your will be done. God, our strength and joy, You have built Your church on Jesus Christ, the sure foundation, and called us to be in mission. We pray for all ministers and lay people in Your church around the world. Give us and them singleness of heart in serving You. Unite us in our one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Through the power and gifts of Your Holy Spirit, equip us for ministry in and to the world. Teaching Your word, healing the sick, nurturing the young, comforting the afflicted, laying down our lives for the sake of the Gospel, or to whatever tasks You call us. These things we

ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord who with You and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns forever. One God, world without end. Amen. And now let us bring to God our tithes and offerings. (somber organ music) (triumphant organ music) (choral singing)

- Oh Lord, we pray You will pour out Your Holy Spirit upon these are gifts and upon us as we offer ourselves that in all things we may glorify Your name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray together saying 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 and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (uplifting organ music) (choral singing)

- Now may the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. (choral singing)