

**Requiem Mass for James Parks Morton
The Rev. Dr. Chloe Breyer, Executive Director, ICNY
The Cathedral of St. John the Divine**

January 11, 2020

*Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”*

Good evening. It is an honor to be here in this great Cathedral with all of you as we celebrate the life of James Parks Morton—Pamela and the Morton family, friends and relatives from far and wide, fellow Episcopal clergy, faith leaders from many traditions and all corners of the city. Thank you to Dean Daniel and others on the Cathedral Staff and to James Carroll for his excellent words reflecting on Jim’s time at the Cathedral. I will pick up where he left off—the story of the Interfaith Center of New York. I bring greetings from St. Philip’s in Harlem and the Interfaith Center of New York.

And I’d like to begin with a question: From Jim’s perspective, what would it have been like to leave this place? This beautiful and vast Cathedral that came to mind as we heard the reading from Isaiah. This “Mountain of the Lord’s House. . . that all the nations stream to.”

Cathedrals have always been, in the words of Mircea Eliade, *axis mundi*—places connecting heaven and earth or ‘navels of the universe.’ In addition, over the course of 25 years, Dean Morton had largely succeeded in fulfilling his dream to make St. John the Divine “a 20th Century version of a medieval Cathedral: a bustling, intellectually provocative town commons.”

So again, what must have it been like to *leave* this Cathedral-- the center of the world you built? How do you move from the heights of ecclesiastical gloriousness to—well--*midtown*?

Transitions tell you a lot about people and in Jim’s case, I have three basic thoughts about how he handled the move from Cathedral to wider world. These observations include good news in it for all of us.

First, Jim continued the practice he had had his whole ministry of making massively bold claims and then doing a LOT of learning on the job.

The day after leaving the Cathedral, for example, Jim started the Interfaith Center of New York, a nonprofit organization without a church affiliation. With the help of Alan Slifka he crafted our early mission statement of “Making New York City *and the world* safe for religious diversity”. In its early days, from what I understand, the large and loft space on 30th St. was a hub of interfaith art exhibits, panels, and speakers including Hans Kung, James Cone, Bill Moyers, Bernard Glassman, Ruth Messinger & Sr. Aisha Al Adwiya. Musical events included everything from the Taiko Shumai Musical ensemble to Philip

Glass. In other words, there were certain similarities to the Cathedral—in a glamorous storefront way.

But and then rent got too high. When that happened, Jim led the Center—Moses-like—through a period of wandering in the wilderness. After 30th St. his friend, a Korean Nun Myo ji Su nim, let ICNY decamp in her Temple—a 2nd story walk up on West 72nd St. The organization moved again to an art gallery on the Upper East Side until finally we came to rest, a year before I arrived, at the Interchurch Center on Riverside Drive. “The God Box,” as it is nick-named, was definitely a step down for Jim, architecturally speaking. But we had heat, light, reliable internet and a cafeteria.

[Then 9/11 happened. The Interfaith work he had been doing for so long took on a whole new level of urgency. Jim called the first interfaith press conference condemning the attacks on the first September 13, and the “Religions of New York series” took on a new urgency as Mike, Timur, and Matt really pounded the pavement going house of worship by house of worship building the foundation of the widely diverse list of grass roots religious leaders the Center maintains today.]

Jim wasn’t afraid to learn on the job. To his credit, Dean Morton took the world on its own terms and was confident enough to surround himself with talented people who challenged him and whose advice he seriously considered—and occasionally even took. Early in the 2000s, when the Interfaith Center staff told him the same six progressive faith leaders from a variety of faith traditions were showing up for ICNY panels on “world peace” and “interfaith understanding” and if they

were to reach across real differences (often existing more *within* religious traditions than across them) they would need to focus on shared practical cares like housing, child health, and domestic violence. Jim agreed. After 9/11, ICNY's partnership the Courts and the "Religions of New York" series did just that.

Two decades later, the Interfaith Center of New York has evolved. We are focused on the 2020 Census right now—finding passages from non-Abrahamic scriptures that support census turnout and, as my colleague Dr. Henry Goldschmidt likes to do, measuring religious diversity by the length of the city's list of alternate-side parking regulation exemptions for religious holidays. Not exactly "Sexy" in the traditional Dean Morton usage of the word—but perhaps a bit "Gritty." It is Interfaith work at street-level.

We as a society have become less and less willing to give our public figures any kind of space to translate mistakes into learning or to allow for the vulnerability that learning and growth requires. So Dean Morton's willingness to learn on the job is to be admired.

Well, there is a second way in which Jim was able managed the transition from the Cathedral to the world. He was a man of faith and his faith told him that God is everywhere.

Where can I go from your spirit? Says the Psalmist

Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

*⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,*

God is everywhere. On the altar and in the streets. We live in a city of 8 million people, almost 30 percent of whom have been born in a different country, there are over 160 different languages recognized officially in the public school system. Looking across the vast swath of human history that are generally characterized by bloodshed, poverty, and ignorance, New York City is sort of divine demographic and democratic miracle.

It is true that terrible things happen here and systemic injustice abounds with the vast inequalities of wealth and racial injustice first and foremost. But empty of God's presence? New York City is certainly not. God reigns and gives us the power to be a people of change. Jim knew that. Here is what he said in a promotional video, "The Interfaith Center of New York arose out of what the demographics are of New York City. . . and they are not Episcopal. I mean, they are everything in the world. And increasingly so."

And that is the final point, wherever he was—Jersey City, Chicago, St. John the Divine, or ICNY it was the relationships and not the place that took priority.

His face book pages are filled with these testimonies: "He changed my life" helped make a dream happen, giving space to artists,

“He took my call on a Sunday night about my brother passing, married him and my wife and then did her memorial service” wrote one person.

“He affectionately called many of us “birds”. Appropriate because he nurtured our ideas and then let many of us fly off to enhanced the lives of thousands through the arts, community service, education and collaborations.”

“He took a young man born in the South Bronx who attended a storefront church of families and he exposed me to interfaith work. . . It was his belief in me, somehow he knew there were things inside of me that I was not quite aware of”

Mark Greeberg, Founder of Interfaith Assembly for Homelessness and Housing said it this way, “Let me just say that Dean Morton changed the direction of my life. Through his inspiration, support, and guidance my view of the world expanded exponentially. I always like to refer to him as the “Ultimate Yes Man.” It was always, “Yes, let’s find a way to do that.”

And that brings us to, not quite a point, but maybe a *half* point. Point 3.5 perhaps about Jim’s transition from the Cathedral to the city. It has to do with his small and very selective hearing impediment.

Marc Greenberg was correct. Jim was the Ultimate Yes Man. I would just add, that out of *my* own experience Jim seemed like such a Yes Man that I often wondered if he couldn’t actually *hear* the word “No”.

Often times I wondered if, when you said “no!” what he heard was “go!”

So, for example, you might say “No Jim, no, you cant invite any other guests for free to our annual fundraising dinner. The seats are all taken and the venue has told the caterer—and besides the dinner begins in six hours.” And what he heard was “Go, Jim go and invite MANY other guests for free to our annual dinner, there is plenty of time and lots of available seats.”

Or else one might say—and this was before my time--, “No Jim, please do not invite belly dancers to an event with a lot of Orthodox Jews, Christians, Muslim, and Protestant Leaders. They will find it offensive.” And what he would hear was, “Go, Jim go and invite LOTS of belly dancers to the event with orthodox clergy and have them meet all the guests at the front door.”

In just a few moment, after we have gathered at the Eucharist and said our prayers, we too will be leaving the Cathedral. We will be following Jim’s body and the family out those bronze doors out though doors following Jim’s body. Will step down onto Amsteram Ave. into a city and a world that has never needed our passion and Jim’s generous vision as it does now. We go into a world of increasing tribalism where the universalism, hospitality, and other-centering strands of all the world’s great religious traditions seems to be losing out to the triumphalist and militant tendencies that they all have.

We step out of the doors tonight and into a world in which we as a species have poured 60 percent of all the greenhouse gasses that ever WERE emitted into the atmosphere SINCE Jim did the earth mass on this altar. We step into a world at war and with rumors of war and one where our democracy itself seems imperiled.

But we are not alone. Scripture tells us that God's green earth is wide and God is merciful. And the gifts that Jim has given us in the time that we have known him—his fearlessness about thinking big and learning on the job (not being afraid to make mistakes) his faith that God is everywhere, and his Gospel witness that relationships are more important than location, all these things are gifts we go out and rejoice over—thankful to God for another day and another opportunity through the struggle for justice to witness to God's Glory.