Ah, isn’t it wonderful for this community to gather together in worship—in spiritual preparation for the inauguration of our 10th president! In the bricks of this chapel, as in the hearts of each of us, are the hopes, strivings, love and even perils of those who have come before. There are angels to be found in this place.

Speaking of Angels…I was standing in a hospital room gazing on my newest angel—a granddaughter—when Dr. Bateman called me. He explained that a renowned Buddhist teacher who had planned to speak here today, had encountered a conflict that made it impossible. Would I, he asked, be willing to deliver a homily on “loving kindness?”

I confess that I was flattered to be asked but somewhat overwhelmed by the thought of stepping into the shoes of a renowned teacher. But I took courage realizing that my favorite Biblical word is the hebrew word “Hesed” —Loving Kindness!! I often use it as a mantra (a word to silently repeat) when I meditate in yoga practice. And it is a key word in my favorite biblical verse, Micah 6: What does the lord require of us but to DO JUSTICE, LOVE Kindness and walk humbly with your god. DO justice, HESED, and walk humbly with your god. While many biblical translations equate hesed with love kindness, it may be more accurate to view Hesed in parallel with Justice. Do justice, Do loving kindness. That requirement to do loving kindness should keep us from confusing Hesed with “be nice” Rather, it connotes a quality that is strong, dynamic and has substance. Ann Ulanov, a Jungian Psychologist and professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, says of Loving kindness that its not a weak broth. It has to have teeth. Loving kindness with teeth!

So what does that look like? How does it inform this community that is undertaking a future with new leadership? As this is an interfaith service, perhaps we should look to eastern traditions to deepen our understanding.

To that end, I called Dr. Bateman to ask the name of the Buddhist teacher whose schedule had led to my speaking. After he gave me Roshe Enkyo’s name, I put it in the search engine of my computer only to discover that she was speaking in 45 minutes a few blocks from our apartment in New York City. My husband Geoff and I headed straight for the Village Zendo to
hear her speak. Her topic was not “loving Kindness” but she told a story that seemed right on point.

Roshe Enkyo was speaking of the effects of deep spiritual practice and the growth it inspires. She remembered being a young zealous protester of the war in Viet nam. And she remembered that in their zeal to end that war they not only showed up at protest marches but that they sometimes mocked soldiers and police. They were trying to Do justice without Doing loving kindness. And she reported that she is pained by that memory to this day.

Eastern sages tell us that loving kindness arises from a realization that we are all interconnected. They offer practices that purport to enhance ones loving kindness. Like a muscle, they tell us, it is possible to develop a more vibrant capacity to be lovingly kind.

And so, thanks to my assignment from Dr. Bateman, I — and now you— have the privilege of exploring a bit of eastern thought and the loving kindness practice that Buddhists prescribe.

Step one: we must pay attention to how we treat ourselves. If you can’t be loving toward your self, you will not be able to be very loving toward others. And so the first series of meditations is directed to loving yourself. When I mention to friends that there is a meditation designed to help us love ourselves, they often object that there is enough self love and ego out there already. This practice of self love is not directed toward that constructed ego. Rather, it is to open us to our essential goodness.

Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist who teaches meditation, tells the story of a high school history teacher who understood that we need to see our goodness in order to empower it. She had a class that was unusually fidgety and difficult one day. In an effort to alter the atmosphere, she closed the books and wrote every class member’s name on the board. She told the students to copy each name and write one thing they liked or admired about that person.

She collected the papers and weeks later, at the end of the term, she handed each student a sheet with his or her name on top. On each sheet she had pasted all 26 good things the other students had written about them. They were delighted to see so many beautiful qualities had been noticed about them.

3 years later, this teacher received a call from the mother of Robert, one of those students. She was told that he had been killed in the Gulf War. The teacher attended his funeral, at which Robert’s mother brought out a worn piece of paper that had been in Robert’s pocket when the military retrieved his possessions. It was the paper that Robert’s teacher had given him.
After the service, another student told her that her sheet of paper had been a part of her wedding service. A third said that his was framed on his kitchen wall. The recognition of goodness initiated by this teacher clearly had a powerful impact!

So, step one is to do the work to love ourselves. Step two is directed toward others. The meditations prescribed allow us to begin by meditating toward those closest to us, people for whom it is easiest to love. Over time, however, the work is to extend the loving kindness practice to more difficult people in our lives. It ultimately demands an open hearted meditation on those we may actively dislike or even hate. As this work of loving kindness requires more than most of us can imagine, the teachers offer this thought to help us along the way. They suggest that it is our ignorance of other people’s situations that keeps us from loving fully.

Alan Wallace, a Western teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, suggests that you “imagine walking along a sidewalk with your arms full of groceries, and someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall and your groceries are strewn over the ground. As you rise up from the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out, ‘You idiot! What’s wrong with you? Are you blind?’ But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped into you is actually blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be replaced by sympathetic concern: ‘Are you hurt? Can I help you up?’”

Could it be that when we react to actions of others we find offensive, that we are missing some information that could help us to see it differently? Kornfield opines that, “when we clearly realize that the source of disharmony and misery in the world is ignorance, we can open the door of wisdom and compassion.”

The Buddhist prescription for developing loving kindness requires a commitment and, I suspect, a lengthy dedication to the practice. For today, it is enough for us to be reminded that each of us has great capacity for “doing loving kindness” and that all the members of this Randolph community deserve our active kindness toward them. If we can commit to grow in this capacity, our Bateman years will be worthy ones.

In summary, the Loving Kindness meditation practice requires that one spend time meditating on loving kindness toward oneself, then loving kindness toward those in your community, and ultimately toward all sentient beings. As we are preparing to embrace President Bateman as a new and extremely important member of our community, I propose that we spend a few minutes in such a meditation. If this is not comfortable for you, please use this time to pray for President Bateman and Randolph College.
Begin by sitting comfortably and gently close your eyes. Please direct your precious power of attention to your centering breath... breathing in, breathing out. Now if you can, picture a time when you did something extremely kind and loving. Allow yourself to remember how you felt. If nothing comes to mind, just picture yourself being loving and open-hearted. Touching that capacity, silently repeat the following phrases: May I be safe, may I have mental happiness (joy, peace), May I have physical happiness (health, zest), May I live with ease filled with loving kindness.

Now picture someone else, in the Randolph College Community. It could be President Bateman or someone with whom you interact often. Silently repeat: May you be safe, may you have mental happiness, may you have physical happiness, May you live with ease, filled with loving kindness.

Finally, call to mind that the entire Randolph College community is interrelated. Students, learning, landscape and buildings all part of a beautiful whole. Now silently repeat may this college community be safe, may this college community have mental happiness (joy, peace), may this college community have physical happiness (health, zestfulness), may it live with ease, filled with loving kindness.

I’d like to close this short reflection on loving kindness by repeating an often told tale called the Rabbi’s gift.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. There were only a few elderly monks left in the decaying house and they could agree on no plan to revitalize the monastery.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. The abbot decided to visit the rabbi to see if he had any wisdom to offer that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained the reason for his visit, the rabbi could only say, "I know how it is. The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

So the old abbot and the old rabbi commiserated together. When the abbot left they embraced each other and the rabbi said, "I am sorry that I can give you no advice but I have come to know one thing: the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery he told the few remaining monks what the rabbi had said.

The old monks wondered about the significance of the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? If so, which one?
Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is a very pious man. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred is difficult and crotchety. But come to think of it, even though he is a pain in the neck, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did?

As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with loving kindness on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of love and respect that began to surround the old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

So now, as we cherish our past and prepare for the Bateman years, let us not forget that the Messiah may be one of us. Maybe President Bateman, maybe a dining hall worker, a professor, a student, an alum... or maybe you.

Here let wisdom AND loving kindness rise!

Amen