

Messiah College Commencement Address
By Peter Greer, President and CEO of Hope International
May 14, 2016

President Phipps, Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, friends and family – this is an honor to be here with you today.

And most importantly, to the class of 2016. Congratulations!

Over the past few years, it has been an incredible privilege to get to know some of you through the Impact Venture Challenge, through a J-term class, and through internships.

Based on my time with Garth, Paul, Alex, Alex, Angela, LarEEssa, Spencer, Josh and so many more, here's what I believe is true about you: Your future is bright. I'm not saying this because this is a graduation speech and I'm supposed to share affirming words to send you into this next chapter. I truly believe it. I am excited to see what God is going to do in you and through you. I've seen your character. Your competency. Your compassion. I truly believe there are great things in store for each of you.

You are joining the ranks of Messiah alumni who, since 1909, have faithfully stepped into all sectors of society and positively impacted the world through their love and service. And you have the added benefit of being at Messiah at this moment in time and witnessing the extraordinary leadership modeled by President Phipps. We have an amazing president, don't we!

In the few minutes I have with you, I want to consider a final question. "What will it take for you to sustain a life of audacious and fearless love?"

This question is one that has been gnawing at me the past 20 years, since I sat where you sit today. Much of my focus since graduating from Messiah has been international. I started working in Cambodia and then Rwanda. I've spent my career focused on places of unexpected beauty alongside crushing poverty and oppression. My focus has been on bringing employment and hope to people in need.

But we all know that you don't have to hop on a plane to rural Rwanda to find brokenness and pain—you can find an abundant supply much closer to home. No matter where you go, graduates, whether in Harrisburg, Honolulu, or Haiti, you will find places and people who need compassion and the love of Jesus.

In addition to our international service, my family wanted to grow in loving the people next door. We looked around us and learned that here in PA, there are more than 15,000 kids waiting for a home. We knew that we could do something. We have room in our home and room in our hearts. We wanted to love kids in crisis.

So we took a deep breath and stepped into a world of addiction, hurt, and pain. We opened up our home, knowing that loving people is an inherently dangerous thing to do. We really thought that we were ready.

But we had no idea what was about to happen.

This experience turned into the single most painful season of our lives. It's not appropriate to share the specific details but this situation is unlike anything I've ever experienced. And the worst part was watching it deeply wound the people that I love the most.

This is probably not the uplifting graduation speech you were expecting! Aren't graduation speeches supposed to be filled with trite affirming words of follow your dreams. You can change the world. Be true to yourself.

But here's the thing graduates, fluffy rhetoric doesn't equip you for a lifetime of audacious love and service. It sets you up for failure when the messy reality of life inevitably collides with our expectation of how life is supposed to be.

If you step out in love, you will experience moments of great beauty alongside moments of great pain. There will be mountain top vistas alongside the deep ravines. Many of you have already experienced this. You know that loving and serving deeply involves joys and hurts. But it doesn't mean you stop loving, just ask your parents.

Our lives and our love and service will not always turn out like a Hallmark special. Maybe it will be locally. Maybe it will be far away. At some point, if you are faithfully loving others, you will experience deep hurt. And I don't want it to crush you. I don't want it to derail you from living a life of audacious and fearless love. I don't want it to stop you from doing the good work that God has prepared you to do.

How are we to respond to the pain that accompanies living lives of audacious and fearless love?

There are some easy responses. Easiest is to simply just stop trying to help. To stop loving.

- Sneak into your cocoon, and allow Netflix to become your best friend. The question of how we love our neighbor can be replaced by the question, "Is it possible to watch an entire season of Friday Night Lights in one sitting?"
- Or get cats. Lots and lots of cats. Because loving animals is easier than loving people.
- Or maybe talk about theories of loving our neighbor instead of putting ideas into practice. It's easy to distance yourself and attend conferences instead of going to broken places.
- Or maybe all you have to do is distract yourself with hobbies. You don't have time to care about others if you're always focused on the next marathon or vacation.

But graduates of Messiah College, REFUSE to settle for the easy route. Refuse to give in to fear. Refuse to slip into indifference. Don't let the fact that living a life of love is difficult stop you

from caring for the hurting. Don't isolate yourself from the joy and pain of serving others. "For God did not give you a spirit of fear, but of power and love and self-discipline." (1 Tim 1:7)

For those of us who want to live a life where Christ is preeminent, indifference simply isn't an option. Loving only when it's convenient isn't an option. Love is supposed to be costly, modeled by a Savior who gave everything. "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

The greatest moments in life are preceded by sweat and tears. The best parts of life, including loving and serving others, are going to require preparation and hard work. And it will be worth it.

How do we do this? How do we sustain a life of audacious and fearless love? Three thoughts, very quickly.

1. Expect that life is going to be hard.

In this world and on this campus there are incredible moments of beauty. Enjoy them. Savor them. I love these moments and I know that you've experienced many of them during your time at Messiah.

But we also shouldn't be surprised by the fact that the world is broken. We shouldn't be surprised when things break. We shouldn't be surprised when relationships are difficult.

We are to go into our service with our eyes wide open that "in this world you will have troubles." These words of Jesus are seldom needle pointed on pillows.

What's the benefit of expecting it? It helps us have greater appreciation for the beautiful moments of life. When I was teaching my J-term class, it was in the middle of our family's significant challenges. And every day I realized it was a gift to come to this campus, spend time with people that I respect and engage in meaningful conversations.

When we expect challenges, we actually increase our ability to savor the moments of joy.

And when we expect challenges, we get prepared.

2. Prepare for it.

If you played sports at Messiah, you never stepped onto Shoemaker field without putting in hours of practice. I vividly remember the first day of preseason soccer at Messiah and the 5 minute mile challenge. I still see Coach Shoemaker with stopwatch in hand. We knew we wouldn't make it if we didn't show up prepared. So for months, we worked hard to get ready for that moment. I've watched many of you over the past 4 years on the fields of Messiah and I know you were prepared. Physically. Mentally. And you experienced tremendous success.

Not just in athletics – you didn’t go into your CPA exams without the discipline of studying – regularly and rigorously. You didn’t join the collaboratory and go to Zambia without spending hours in the lab preparing for your service. And I know you’d never walk into an interview without being prepared.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Action springs not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility.”

Graduates, I want you to have a readiness for responsibility. That means that in every season – good and bad – we are investing deeply in our faith that grounds us through whatever we’re going to face. Being prepared means that our inner prayer life becomes every bit as important as the outward work we do. Being prepared is about building a solid foundation and involves the small decisions which shape our character and our faith.

And preparation almost never happens alone. Life is not meant to be a solo sport. One of the most valuable things you’ve received at Messiah College is not just your education, but your friendships. Invest in them. Don’t let them grow cold. Some of my closest friends today are the roommates I had at Messiah 20 years ago. And it’s not just your classmates. I am proud that 20 years ago I took classes from Vince LaFrance, Dean Curry, Jay Mcdermond, and Jim Krimmel. Today, they are friends.

Strong lifelong friendships don’t just happen--they take intentionality and commitment. Invest in the relationships that matter and they will help you be prepared for all seasons of life.

To sustain a life of audacious and fearless love, we are to expect it will be hard. We are to be prepared. And third, we are to look up.

3. Look up.

Where do we fix our eyes? Question you need to ask.

- Look back and obsess on our past. We can be crushed by past failures and obsess over “if only” scenarios.
- Look forward and fret over our future. Especially easy for some of you who still have questions about what is going to come next week let alone next year. Will I live in my parents’ basement forever? Your parents are asking that same question.
- Look inward and be paralyzed by our hurt.
- Look side to side and ask why other people seem to have it easier than we do.

We are to be a people of hope who look up. This is not a cliché. These are true words. When things get really hard, we remember that we have nowhere else to go. As we read in Psalms 121, “I lift my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, maker of Heaven and earth.” Look to Jesus, the One who perfectly shows us what audacious and fearless love looks like in practice.

Graduates, as you step out in the significant work of loving others, do it empowered by the Spirit and covered in grace. Do it surrounded by a community of people cheering you on and supporting you. Do it knowing that God has promised to use all things, including the moments of great success as well as our most heart-wrenching moments, for our good and His glory.

My hope for you is that you will be known as men and women who run to the suffering and the hurting when the rest of the world runs away. That you will stop to make time to respond to the needs all around you—even though they will bring beauty and pain. That you would be prepared to live fearlessly and love boldly. And that you will continue to follow in the dangerous work of loving like the Messiah.

We, as your family and friends, are cheering you on!
