

Messiah College Commencement Address

Saturday, May 16, 2015 10:00am

By: Marla Frederick

Thank you President Kim Phipps, distinguished platform party, friends, guests and the most important reason for our presence here today — the members of the magnificent class of 2015. And, to those who are TRULY celebrating today because you are (at this very moment), feeling something of a “supernatural financial increase” because money that has been flowing out of your wallets and purses for the past four years, is *finally* sitting still -- to all of the mothers and fathers and grandparents and extended family, who have sacrificed so much to make this day possible, we salute YOU! Graduates please stand and give a rousing round of applause to your family and loved ones. And, to my wonderful husband, Eric, who joined me here to celebrate with you on this, his birthday weekend -- Happy Birthday, Love!

I have been asked to speak for about 10-12 minutes. Now, I want you to know that I was born and raised Baptist. My great grandmother used to say, “Baptist born, Baptist bred and when I die I’ll be Baptist dead.” So, even though I now worship with the Methodists, being a good Baptist at heart at 10 minutes, we are generally just getting warmed up, just finishing up our introduction, so this is a *major* challenge for me. But, I am going to try my best to rise to the occasion and offer sober words of inspiration and encouragement for a class who is leaving a seemingly tailor made world of loving professors, supportive staff and administrators, trusted friends and entering into a world seemingly marked with anxiety and disorder. The question of the moment for the class of 2015 is how do you successfully navigate the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the rules of engagement have changed so dramatically and the global landscape seems fraught with trouble?

Numbers tell a story:

8,000+ - the number of people killed in the earthquakes in Nepal over the past three weeks.

276 --- The number of Nigerian girls kidnapped from their home last year

214 out of 234 --- the number of girls returned to their homes, but pregnant  
30,000 – the estimated number of people who commit suicide each year in the US.  
2.2million -- the number of people in America's jails and prisons, making us the world's  
leader in incarcerations.  
48 million -- the estimated number of people living in poverty in the US

Numbers tell one story, but the real lives of each and every one of these individuals tells an altogether more complex story of hopes, dreams and possibilities short lived and families and communities devastated by natural disaster or failed humanity. We have a world in desperate need of your attention.

Each and every one of their lives matters to a God who departs from the masses to go in search of the one lost sheep. And, because we are all caught in a mutual bond of brotherhood/sisterhood, we have an obligation to one another regardless of race, class, gender or sexual orientation - despite its highly politicized and contested nature and despite our various religious and ethnic backgrounds. We are all God's creation and thus care takers of one another.

What compels us to manifest this care? One word, Grace. The very fact that we are gathered here today, under these glorious circumstances, is a complete experience of grace, God's wonderful grace in our lives. What do we do with such enormous generosity? How do we make the most of unmerited favor? After all, only an estimated 30% of Americans and less than 7% of the world's population have a 4-yr bachelor's degree. And, the numbers with advanced degrees declines from there. So, what is being transferred to you today is an enormous amount of privilege. I do not have all of the answers regarding what you should do with this rare privilege once you leave these hallowed halls, but I do have some suggestions, based upon what we know to be God's value for human life.

I want to leave you with just three pieces of advice:

1. First - Put your treasurers in the right place. Our world has increasingly misled us by tying “value” almost exclusively to monetary measures. Everything from religion to water to *eggs and sperm* to beauty is for sale on the open market and too often linked to a profit motive. And, cherished rights like democratic elections and quality education are increasingly linked to those who live in the right zip code or are of a certain socio-economic class. In his book “What Money Can’t Buy” philosopher, Michael Sandel writes, “The reach of markets, and market-oriented thinking, into aspects of life traditionally governed by non-market norms is one of the most significant developments of our time...” It has resulted in “the expansion of markets, and of market values into spheres of life where they don’t belong.”<sup>1</sup>

And, yet on the subject of money and treasures one of the greatest sermons I have ever heard in my life came from a pastor of a thriving Pentecostal Church in Kingston, Jamaica where I conducted ethnographic field research. His scripture verse came from Luke 12:34 “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” He emphasized the importance of the *ordering* in the text. “The scripture does not say where your *heart* is there too is your *treasure*. No! It says where your *treasure* is there too is your *heart*.” He then went on to ask the congregation to take inventory. We were instructed to draw a line down the center of a piece of paper, creating two columns. In the first column we were to write down our heart’s true loves. So, like good pious Christians many of us wrote down – the Lord, my husband, my wife, my family, friendships, ministry. In the second column we were to write down where we spend our treasures – our time, our talent our money. He wanted us to account for how we spend our time, including precious time watching television, on Facebook, Instagram, and twitter. We were then instructed to check our bank records; pull out our checkbooks. Where do we spend most of our money? Immediately, several of us began hiding our sheets. As you begin on this great journey called life, I challenge you as he challenged us...Take consistent inventory. Because your heart, indeed, will follow your treasures.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Sandel, What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 7.

2. Once you figure out your time, talent and treasures, you have to figure out where you are taking them. Isn't that the big question we have all been asking? What is God's will for my life? And, unlike in some clothing styles, there is never a "one size fits all" option in life. Each of us is created and equipped to impact the world in various ways. Comparing our lives to that of another's is an exercise in futility. The point is to get moving where God is at work in the world. And, God is busy doing a lot of different kinds of good work. I know some of you probably grew up in households where you had four career options – Doctor, Lawyer, Engineer or Loser. Now, I know some parents might feel that way after looking over the college bill, but I promise you, God has a much more capacious set of options from which you may choose. Some of you may be asking: Does God want me to be a lawyer? Does God want me to be a doctor? I know at one point I asked, "Does God want me to be an anthropologist?" But, somewhere along the way I read this book by Jerry Sittser entitled, *The Will of God As a Way of Life* and it taught me a very important lesson. God is not so concerned with *what* you become, but rather, *who* you become. In other words, if you become a lawyer, be a lawyer with integrity. If you become a doctor, be a doctor of highest ethical standards. In the long run, I believe God is much more concerned about our character than he is in our occupation. As Martin Luther King quoted Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays,

"If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, sweep streets like Beethoven composed music, sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well. If you can't be a pine at the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley. But, be the best little shrub on the side of the hill."

3. And, that leads me to my last and final point. It is not just about time, talent and treasure. And, it is not just about where your time, talents and treasures will take you. Your life is ultimately about the process of continued cultivation. When it is all said and done, we are *not* defined by titles. We are not defined by our accolades and awards. And, the measure of our humanity will not be based upon our accumulated income. The

true marks of a healthy life are defined by healthy habits. My parents use to say, “People do not decide their futures. They decide their habits and their habits decide their future.”

For 4 years now, you have been cultivating habits -- habits of intellectual curiosity, habits of Socratic reflection, habits of prayerful meditation, habits of service, habits of celebrating and appreciating cultural differences, habits of dedicating yourself to a cause greater than yourself. That is what you have been doing. That’s why you chose to come to Messiah College, a leading Christian liberal arts college, because you wanted to merge your intellect with a robust understanding of God’s will for your life and work in the world. Here at Messiah you have been diligently preparing to leave here and become thermostats of social change, dictating a positive/life-affirming climate for our society.

Your positive habits have gotten you here today and the very thing that got you here will lead you forward. Continue to be great class of 2015! The future is yours!