

“What It’s All About”

*Messiah College 2014 Commencement*

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Members of the 2014 graduating class of Messiah College, congratulations to you for having arrived at this point in your journeys. It’s a great honor for me to have this opportunity to express a few thoughts to you on this important occasion. But first I want to make an announcement on behalf of the faculty and administration of the College.

It has been Messiah’s pleasure to serve you thus far. The school appreciates your business. The folks here at Messiah know you have a choice of colleges and they thank you for choosing Messiah College. If your future plans should call for more Christian higher education, we hope that you will think of Messiah College.

And one more thing—and this leads me to a serious point—be sure to be careful in opening the overhead compartments, because the contents may have shifted during your journey here.

Again, that is a way of making a serious point. I do hope the contents of your minds have shifted a bit because of what you have learned here at Messiah College. You have been exposed to some great ideas. You have read many assigned texts, written many papers and tests, studied film and other artistic expressions, learned about various patterns of professional service, done some experiments and field projects. And all of that was designed by this world class faculty to rearrange the contents of your minds—even adding some things to those contents.

If all of that has worked in you in the way it was intended, then you have gained the capacity for significant critical reflection on important matters. And that is a good thing. I hope you will continue to cultivate a robust intellectual life.

During the years when I was teaching in an undergraduate philosophy department, one of my senior departmental colleagues was a great storyteller. One of his delightful tales—he insisted that this really happened—was about a conversation that he claimed to have overheard between two women students who were talking in the hallway outside his office. His door was slightly ajar, so he could hear what they were saying—especially since the conversation was quite impassioned. The boyfriend of one of the young women had just broken up with her, and she was very distraught, sobbing loudly. Her friend was attempting to comfort her, but none of her therapeutic strategies seemed to be working. Finally, the would-be counselor made a bold

pastoral move. “Look,” she said to her grieving friend, “you’ve just got to be *philosophical* about this!” “What do you mean?” the distraught young woman asked through her tears. Her friend replied: “Just don’t *think* about it!”

Needless to say, that is not the way we faculty types see our task. We try to get students to think carefully about important questions. So on behalf of your teachers here at Messiah, I have to encourage you to continue to think about significant things—the kinds of significant things that have been very much on the academic agenda here during your time at Messiah.

But I also hope that you will be always clear about what this is really all about: that this thinking, as well as the other kinds of sensitivities and concerns that have come into your lives during this course of studies, will always be directed toward the most important goal for any Christian, and that is the goal of bringing glory to God by promoting the cause of Christ’s Kingdom.

Men and women of the graduating class of 2014, the world desperately needs people who are gifted with the ability to think carefully about the basic issues of life. And for all of the complex thinking to which we are called as people who have been privileged to participate in this great project of Christian liberal arts education, it really comes down to some rather simple things in the end. But the simplicity must be for the likes of us has to be of a very special sort.

A book that has profoundly influenced my views on race relations has the title *Slave Religion*, written by the Princeton African-American historian Albert Raboteau. At one point in that book, Raboteau shows how the Christian slaves of the Old South typically had a deep reverence for the Bible, so much so that even those who did not know how to read nonetheless found ways to make the Bible a central focus of their devotional lives.

One of the stories Raboteau tells is about a young illiterate slave woman, a nursemaid to her master’s family, who enlisted the white children to teach her how to recognize the word “Jesus.” Having gained possession of a Bible, she would regularly find a quiet place where she would turn the pages of the Bible, running her fingers up and down the pages, until she found the name of Jesus.

I admire that young slave woman. I want her kind of simple love of her Lord, and her deep conviction that what the Bible is all about is Jesus. For those of us who have passed, as Christians, through the disciplined thinking afforded by programs in higher education—we can’t simply forget all that we have learned: the questions, the times of doubts, the wrestling with

various challenges to our faith. In the end, though, we need to cultivate what some scholars have called the “second naivete.” This means, for me, that the slave woman had it right. In the end, the Bible is all about trusting and following Jesus, the One who loved us so much that he came to live and die for the likes of us, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Oliver Wendall Holmes put it well when he said, “I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity that is on the other side of complexity.” So here is a simple statement that I hope you can embrace on the other side of complexity, as a profound expression of the second naivete: when all is said and done it is all about Jesus. That is what this school is all about in the final analysis, promoting the cause of Christ’s Kingdom: that he—the heaven sent Messiah of God-- might have preeminence in all things.

So my charge to you today is simply this: *be faithful to Jesus*. And do so with courage and unwavering commitment.

A few years ago around this time, the Jesuit magazine, *America*, asked various people what they would say if they were giving a commencement address. The Benedictine nun Sister Joan Chittister responded by saying that she would tell this story: “Once upon a time,” the story goes, “a warlord rampaged through the countryside, ravaging, and killing as he went. Word spread quickly from village to village and the peasants fled for their lives. As he strode into the last of the villages, the warlord said with a smirk, “The village is empty, I presume?” “Well, yes, my Lord,” his lieutenant answered. “Except, that is, for one monastic nun, a woman who refuses to leave.” The warlord was furious. “Bring her to me immediately,” he roared. So they dragged the elderly monastic to the square. “Do you not know who I am?” the warlord shrieked. “I am he who can run you through with a sword without even batting an eye!” “And do you not know who I am?” the old monastic said, looking him straight in the eye. “I am she who can let you run me through with a sword—without even batting an eye.”

That is the kind of courage we need from you in today’s world where there is much to challenge us—and many wonderful opportunities for service, if we are willing to take them up with courage. But it isn’t just about courage. The kind of courage we Christians need to cultivate has to be intimately linked to hope for the future.

And we do look forward to a glorious future. There is a greater commencement that is coming, and when we get to that commencement we will wear robes again—not our academic robes at that commencement, but the pure robes of the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Here is how the writer of the Book of Revelation describes that commencement in chapter 7:

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'*

That is where we are headed if we are followers of Jesus.. So be faithful—living with courage and in hope, in obedience to the cause of the Gospel. And then we will see each other there at the more glorious commencement that is coming! Until then, God bless you all.