

## *Perfect Love Casts Out Fear*

Thank you, President Phipps, members of the faculty, proud parents and grandparents, restless siblings, devoted friends and anyone else who snuck in. Congratulations to all of you. But especially, congratulations to the Class of 2012. Thanks be to God that graduation day has finally arrived.

I would never have guessed 25 years ago, when I was a janitor at Wolf Trap Farm Park right outside D.C., that I would be standing in front of you today. A few weeks ago I was in Oxford, England, and I was staying in C.S. Lewis' old home, the Kilns. I was working on this talk in the very room in which he died. One evening while I was eating dinner with a few visiting guests in Lewis' dining room, we were introducing ourselves, and the woman sitting across from me said, "Hi, my name is Jessica and I'm a student at Messiah College." I've discovered that Messiah students are everywhere.

Later that evening I asked myself, "How is it that my life has come to a place where I'm staying in C.S. Lewis' house and writing a commencement speech for the Class of 2012 graduating from one of the finest and most unique colleges in the country?" If my own path has taught me anything, it has taught me that however well we plan, life has a way of making us grow by disrupting our plans. And this can be frightening. It can feel like failure. It can break our hearts. But you can't begin to guess where experiences of fear, failure or heartbreak will take you next. In fact, as I sat in C.S. Lewis' bedroom thinking about how I got here, I realized that I'm standing before you because my girlfriend broke up with me in 1986. More about that in a moment.

I think I'm probably the main thing standing between you and your diploma, so I'm only going to talk long enough to remind you of one true thing that has mattered in my life. You've heard it many times before, but listen one more time: *Perfect love casts out fear.*

We all experience fear. I guarantee you that your parents have experienced fear multiple times during your time at Messiah, starting the moment they drove away from unloading your stuff at the dormitory and saw their kid waving in the rear-view mirror, to the day you announced plans to go to Uganda to participate in intercultural ministry, or to go to Oxford University to study philosophy and economics. And every student at this ceremony is about to overcome fear for something worthwhile, because I *know* every one of you is afraid you're going to trip as you walk across the stage to get your well-earned diploma.

We live in a culture of fear—fears about high unemployment, fears about financial instability, fears about terrorism, fears about war. We hear about fear through television, radio, newspapers and airport loudspeakers.

But there is another message that comes from a place far more reliable than today's headlines, reminding us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. Not death, not life, not angels, not demons. Not 9/11, not recession, not a breakup with a girlfriend or boyfriend. Nothing. Because of that, even when we're afraid, we can risk living courageously, joyfully.

And when we overcome challenges, we can rightly celebrate our victories, such as winning the baseball conference championship for the second year in a row.

I have learned the most about living in the face of fear from my favorite teachers: the children with cancer I care for. This past Monday I had to tell a strong, courageous, life-loving 19-year-old young man that I cannot cure his cancer. If it's OK with you, I'm dedicating this talk to him. His name is Skyler. After some tears and some hugs and, believe or not, some laughter, he said, "Give me a couple of days and I'll tell you what I need." As I speak to you here, he's planning how to most fully live the life that is left to him, and I have no doubt that he will live it fully.

That kid knows God's love. He makes me want to *eat up* the life and love I meet in every precious day and let go of every whining, fretful worry I hold onto, because he reminds me that even in this moment, I am experiencing gifts from God – breathing, seeing, being with you during your celebration. He reminds me to be grateful today for the gifts of praying, creating and diving into the joy of every sunrise, every sunset, every glance at the faces of the people I adore. That young man is one of my many teachers and he makes me want to live life fully, not bound by fear and frustration.

I love the kids I care for. But if I had not overcome my fear of the demands of medical school, I would never have met these kids. If I had not declined my safe spot in graduate school at Columbia University to wander around Europe for a year with no job and little money, I would never have met the surgeon in Germany who inspired me to go to medical school. And I would never have considered putting my career on hold while I explored the world if my girlfriend had not broken up with me in 1986, forcing me to rethink everything.

In my life, at every important step, I've had to face the fear of failure. Sometimes I have failed, and those have been important times of learning. In some cases, the jury is still out about whether or not I'll fail. Here's an example: My oldest dream is to be a novelist. But despite writing six days a week every week for the past 22 years, I have not yet published a novel. No worries. This dream is a part of who God made when God made me, and I will keep at it no matter what. For years now, I have held close to my heart an off-handed comment made in an interview with an actor named Raymond Burr, who was quite famous in his day. The interviewer asked him, "Mr. Burr, what would you want to be if you were not a successful actor?" And he answered without hesitation, "An unsuccessful actor." Please don't let fear of failure stop you from pursuing the work that you love, whatever it may be. One of the most important ways God leads is through the genuine desires God places in our hearts – and why should that be surprising?

As you go after your dream, there will almost certainly be unexpected detours. En route to this day, I have been a fry cook, a dishwasher, an apple packer and a waiter. And as I mentioned, my first job after college was as a janitor, so if you haven't landed your dream job as of today, don't worry, you're in good company. I actually enjoyed most of those jobs because of the people I met. But there are times when our jobs can feel tedious and insignificant. In those times, remember this: Christians measure success differently than the world does. Because it's not just the big game-changing decisions that shape a life; it's the small, daily responses to everything that comes our way, including heartbreak, tedium, failure and frustration.

Here is one of my personal small frustrations at work: slow drivers in the parking garage when I'm late for a meeting. My wife will tell you I drive too fast – way too fast. I suppose everyone is entitled to their opinion. But I learned an important lesson about my petty frustration from a beautiful young woman with cystic fibrosis. Tiffany has had two lung transplants. One day, I made the mistake of mentioning the slow garage drivers to Tiffany, and, not being one to pull punches, she got up in my face and said, “When I was told that I was rejecting my first lung transplant I was so numb with terror and grief that I could hardly find my way through the hospital. Do you know anything about what the person driving in front of you has to face that day? Maybe that's as fast as they can go in their grief.”

She was right. STOP it. Slow down. Love. You have no idea what another person might be facing in their life.

Love the frantic grocery store clerk who can't find the price of your vegetables while irritated, exhausted people stare at her from the long checkout line. Love the elderly person in front of you who is slowly trying to get the day's tasks done despite the heavy sorrow of losing a spouse. Love the young mother with three kids who can't seem to stop fussing at them; maybe she is doing everything alone. Just love them. Love can transform even the most mundane day. Love can transform you. Love can overcome fear and frustration. There's no better way into the richness of a *truly* successful life measured by something besides the number that shows up at the bottom of our tax forms.

No one using the world's standard for success is likely to say that ending up on a cross, naked in front your friends and family and strangers counts as a successful life. It's easy enough to see why even the frightened disciples who scattered on Good Friday thought the same thing. But *we* know that Friday was not the end of the story. *We* know that the *meaning* of the Lord's suffering broke through on Sunday when the terror of death was met with the victory of his resurrection. When things seem hopeless and scary, remember that. Never, never, *never* forget in the darkness what you have seen in the light.

Now, I was completely surprised when I was asked to give this commencement speech to you. When I was working as a janitor at that outdoor theater, I would *never* have guessed that 25 years later I would be standing in front of you. Twenty five years from now you may be giving this talk to the graduating class of 2037. What do you hope you'll be able to say if that happens? Here's my hope for you: I hope you can say that even when you were afraid, you were willing to risk a lot to follow the true dream that God placed in your heart. I hope you are able to tell them that you had the courage to think “big,” but that as a Christian you came to understand in a deeper way what ‘big’ means. Not necessarily getting a big check or having a big office or doing a big job, but, rather, living a life of faithfulness measured more by the way you *love* than by the car you drive. And I hope you are able to say that you have learned to forgive others, and that you have learned to forgive yourself – you'll need that.

As a frequently scared southern boy trying to live life in a way that honors my young patients who are trying to live their short lives in the face of terror, I can tell you by way of conclusion – and yes, I am almost done – that if fear guides your decisions, you might miss some of the most

important and valuable experiences in your life. I am a living example right *now* of facing fear for the sake of something that matters, and here is why: Being with you today is one of the greatest honors of my life. But let me tell you one of my own personal fears: I have horrible stage fright. I'm here because I overcame *my* fear and took a risk for you. So do something for me: Overcome *yours*. And, above everything else, love. Love. Just love.

Class of 2012, congratulations, and may God bless you in abundant, surprising, and sometimes scary ways.

Thank you.