

Reflection & Prayertime – May 18, 2020

Graduation Day

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” - Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

This morning I gave a brief speech at the graduation ceremony of our Addiction Recovery program for men who had completed a soft skills career class with our great community partner, Goodwill Industries. The men had watched some modules and done some mock interviewing exercises to be able to do well in job interviews, and 22 of them received certificates. When I was asked to be a part of the ceremony this morning, I didn't hesitate to accept because I absolutely love graduation ceremonies. I find them to be so very meaningful and important in the life of the graduate and the people celebrating them. I love attending graduations and usually cry because I am so touched by them.

Not everyone feels this way and I bet if I were to take a poll here, many of you know someone who is just not that into it. My own husband skipped his college graduation, and I have several friends who say it's usually a too long, arduous ceremony where you get tired of sitting and you just try to get through it. At my son's college graduation ceremony, a 4 or so year old little boy was sitting behind us and when someone announced that the 2,000 graduates would be coming forward, he yelled out "OH NO!" Even his little brain could comprehend that there would be some serious sitting going on for long while. When the 1,000 graduate students were instructed by the announcer to come forward, he yelled out, "mom, I'm gonna need a sandwich!" and we all felt his pain and his challenge for endurance. We could have all used a sandwich at that point.

So if graduations are so challenging and unwieldy, why do we do them? Why take the time? Why the speeches? Why the ceremony? Why don't we just hand over the certificate or diploma (or better yet just mail them) and be done with it?

I don't know the history of how graduations started, but I do have an inkling of why we might do them. Of course there is just tradition but why do we carry it onward? What's the gain to the individual or those gathered?

I would put forward for your consideration that the reason we do them is because something extremely noteworthy has taken place. When there is a graduation someone has moved to a new level of knowledge and understanding. They have rejected staying stagnant, rejecting change and improvement. They have put a stake in the ground to say I'm moving forward. I'm not passively drifting through the days of my life; I'm taking control of my journey, my destiny if you will, and I'm an active participant in shaping my own life and how it turns out. I'm not a passive participant; I'm charting my waters through new knowledge and skill development. I'm in charge of shaping my future. And this is a big deal.

The status quo – that is, keeping everything the same, is a strong force. There is a TV commercial that says a body in motion tends to stay in motion and a body at rest stays at rest. Graduation says that the body and mind has chosen motion and forward movement, going against the grain of the status quo. It says that learning and improvement is important and someone has put the time and effort and energy into the acquisition of an educational endeavor and skills. It says I will grab onto something with both hands and make it my own. It says I value learning and I will take advantage of the learning opportunities available to me. It says I matter enough to be serious about this and I won't just drift aimlessly.

In a graduation, the community of people around you take it seriously also. And while it's especially challenging during a time of Covid-19 to gather the community; one could say that the circumstances this year didn't allow for much pomp and circumstance, we pressed on today and did it virtually as we did not want to miss this opportunity to mark and celebrate learning. Just as when an ambulance approaches, we all pull over to the side because something critical and important is happening, when a graduation happens we set aside our normal activity to stop – we adjust our schedule - and we conclude together that something important and noteworthy has happened and is worthy of our time and attention – a milestone has been reached! Something has changed! The status quo is no more because someone has achieved something quite important. There is something happening here!

Some of the people we serve have difficulty fitting into and negotiating educational systems and the other systems in our world and they stumble.

One of our roles in this organization involves promoting compassion and justice so that success is more accessible to many and not just those who are privileged.

After my father passed away several years ago, I found his high school year book from when he graduated in 1958 and there was all the usual stuff you'd expect in it, and then there was this random essay he'd written – the only one in the yearbook – that seemed just kind of randomly thrown in there, but that I hope his teachers took to heart when they read it. It was entitled The Grumbler and it read like this:

I can't see why my class has selected or elected me to be the "Grumbler" when I don't even talk very much, saying nothing about grumbling. As the job is mine, I must perform in some form or fashion. It is not so hard to do after all as it is kindly contagious, everyone does it. I have decided that this is a world of grumbles all crumbled together. No one is satisfied, but if one could find a satisfied person he would be a worthless person, so why grumble about grumbling?

I'm going to leave this school. It's too bad, but I just can't stand things any longer. I heard Mr. Mitchell say the other day, speaking of me, "His mind has just one dimension: thickness." It's not fair. I know a lot of things but they never ask me the things I know. They all hurry me, too, especially Miss Eva. she looks at me and says, "Do you know?" and then under her breath, "No, you wouldn't," and doesn't give me a chance to think at all. Of course, I never do know, but how can she be so sure that I don't? Tell me that!

I can tell all about the birds in the woods and the flowers in the meadows. I can fix a leaky pipe and raise a garden or even paper a room, if I don't have to use the rule in the book to find out how much paper I need. Honest I know lots about such things, but I can't spell and the best mark I ever got on a composition was a D minus. I usually get an E in red ink. But I'm awfully good at straightening up the rows of desk and changing the water on the goldfish and going for the janitor when the pipes don't get hot.

Mrs. Mitchell said to Miss Eva, "Thank goodness there is something he can

do!" So I guess she missed me when I left her classes even if I couldn't pass the citizenship tests.

When Mrs. Neville would take the Science Class out into the country--she calls it a field-day, goodness, it's just a little stroll! -- she has to ask me all the birds and flowers and bugs. She doesn't know one from the other, and she's almost--well I don't know how old. Seems to me I get almost as much fun knowing what I know as she does knowing what she knows. Political parties and present participles and x plus y don't sound half as exciting as woodchucks, blue-jays and treetoads.

It's funny thing how teachers always act different when there's company. You know: Their voices get so sort of soft and kind---not a bit like what it is when we're alone and nobody knows the answers. Miss Lovey Raburn, our Superintendent, was in our room one day and I raised my hand for every question but Miss Eva never called on me. She never does when there's company.

Miss Lucy said the other day, "How can you get along in business William Seth, when you can't even add in bookkeeping?" And I said, "I ain't going in business, Miss Lucy, but if I was, I'd get an adding machine and a bookkeeper." She thought I was fresh but I didn't mean to be.

I don't see any sense wasting so much time reading things in books. By the time you get something learned somebody else writes a new book and proves all you have learned is wrong. You can't believe all you read, especially what's in the papers.

Yet I really did like the poem Miss Eva read to us the other day, though, about trying to do hard things. It said folks should hitch their wagon to a starfish and try to get up and high and be somebody. Seems a funny thing to do, but she ought to know. I haven't any wagon, but could borrow one from Curtis, I suppose. He never uses it.

Curtis is a friend of mine, and we often talk things over. He's a fine chap; you'd like him. Curtis says the teachers don't like me because I ask so many questions they can't answer. They think I just do it to be smart, but I

don't; I want to know. I thought that was what they were for, but Curtis says, "No, they're to ask questions, not to answer them."

They all think I'm stupid and won't ever amount to anything, but I won't be discouraged. I'll just hitch my wagon to a starfish and show'em what I can do. But I'll have to leave school, for I'm wasting my time here.

Curtis says they'll be glad to get rid of me, but that's okay. The pleasure is mutual.

I love my dad's sassiness and that he recognized and asserted his own expertise and knowledge, and I'm glad he did make it to high school graduation. I wish he'd had a more positive experience in school and had grown to love books, although clearly Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on Civilization that had the "hitch your wagon to a star" phrase greatly resonated with him.

Much of our work is helping people hitch their wagon- their strengths, if you will, to the star of their own dreams so that they can fully realize their potential as they see fit to do so. This month, a young woman named Amy Kalber will mark another year of about a decade of sobriety after our addiction recovery program's treatment and will get her Master's Degree in Social Work. Another woman, Shameka Sells-Moore, homeless a little over a decade ago, begins writing her dissertation for her PhD. And this December, Marcus Stubbs, a homeless teenager in our Unity House shelter about a decade ago, submits his dissertation project. We know that it was not easy for any one of these or all the people they represent that have been served in their moment of vulnerability and challenge, yet they have risen above such tough circumstances to excel. And that is because their wagons were hitched to this organization that helped them reach for the stars. And they represent so many more, some that you can name.

Today, we celebrate the incredible accomplishments of the ones we serve and we celebrate all of you who were on the sidelines of their journey, rooting and hoping for them and providing a service that saw them on their way forward. Never underestimate the power of your support and care for those on the journey then and now. Thanks be to God.

