

Congratulations to those of you who are graduating today. You have sacrificed much, given much, labored much, and endured much – and I hope you have received much in return.

Congratulations!

And congratulations to those of you who have loved and supported our new graduates through their journey here. Many of you have sacrificed much, given much, labored much. God bless you for it. As the Psalmist says, may those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

And congratulations to those of us, staff and faculty, who have walked alongside these new graduates. We feel proud today. Proud, and hopeful, that this class will bear blessing in their diverse ministries of leadership and service.

And graduates of the class of 2010, may God's Spirit sustain you with love, with hope, with wisdom, strength, and skill. May you know God's presence in a personal, energizing, transforming way. May blessing attend you as you go forth.

I

Friends, sisters, brothers: We are the inheritors of Jesus' prayer. This prayer is for us.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus gathered his disciples on the night of his arrest. According to John 13, *Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* At that meal

- Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and he taught them.
- He prepared them for life after his departure.
- He promised them the Holy Spirit, who would guide and instruct them – and most of all, who would dwell within them, bearing divine life.
- He warned them that it might be difficult to follow him, that their faithful discipleship would provoke hostility – friends, conflict is a part of leadership – that they must abide in him in order to thrive.

As Jesus prepared his disciples that night, he did what you will do when you send someone you love off into the world. He did what we will do today during the commencement ceremony. Jesus prayed for them.

And sisters and brothers, we are the inheritors of this prayer. This prayer is for us. Jesus says he prays not only for his disciples but for all who come to believe. That's we.

Now, source and redaction critics will tell us that Jesus never spoke such a prayer. (Those of you who haven't learned about source and redaction critics, that's for another day.) And they are likely correct; perhaps Jesus did not speak such a prayer on the night of his arrest. But something more important is true: at every moment the risen Jesus is living this prayer on our behalf. This prayer was written to remind us what Jesus was about – and what Jesus is about. This prayer is written for those who will follow Jesus beyond his earthly career. Sisters and brothers, this prayer is our inheritance. This prayer is for us.

## II

When I was in seminary people actually typed their papers. We didn't have email or the web. If you wanted to look up a journal article on a given topic, there was a set of about forty red-bound index volumes you could dig through, one for every year. Student apartments were three miles from the academic complex, five miles if it snowed.... Wait, am I wandering? Oh, yes.

When I was in seminary I took a course on the history of preaching in America. At one point we studied the ecumenical movement, that great endeavor to unite the diverse Christian bodies. We studied it as a grand movement of the past, located in the 1960s and 70s. Preachers like Eugene Carson Blake and Bishop James Pike. And there it was, in seminary at the age of 24, that this Baptist first heard of the United Church of Christ.

It sounded grand, this church founded on the vision that all of Christ's people should be one. I was impressed, so much so that I devoted a day to the ecumenical movement when I taught Religion in America to college students. But here's the point: the church's oneness seemed like a goal. It seemed like something the church must labor for, that there's much to be done before

the church can attain unity. The UCC drew its motto – “That they may all be one” – from this prayer.

Ten years later I came to Lancaster, a seminary of the United Church of Christ with students from a huge diversity of Christian bodies. And I learned something here. The people who shaped this Seminary believed that the church **IS** one whether it looks like it or not. No matter how divided we may *seem*, our unity resides in Jesus Christ. As John Williamson Nevin, who taught theology here from 1840 to 1851, put it:

The church is composed of a vast number of individual members; but these are all actuated by the power of a common life, and the whole of this life gathers itself up ultimately or fundamentally in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the principle or root of the Church; and the Church through all ages is one, simply because it stands, in the presence and power of this root, universally and forever.

Look around at these windows. Yes, they’re almost exclusively guys made to look white, but look around. People you’ll rarely find associated with one another: Catholic icons like Francis. Pre-Reformation reformers like Hus. A whole window for Luther, but Calvin, Knox, and Zwingli as well. Their likenesses gathered in this chapel, their institutional legacies keenly divided. This chapel testifies to the church and its unity.

Back in seminary, I thought our unity was something we should strive for. Here at Lancaster, I learned that our unity does not depend on us. It doesn’t depend on whether we agree. Doesn’t depend on whether we pray together. Doesn’t depend on how wet we got when we were baptized. Sisters and brothers, we are one because Jesus Christ is one, and Christ’s life animates us all. That’s something I’ve learned here at Lancaster. I hope you have too.

### III

Now let’s be real. We disagree on stuff. Important stuff. If we’re real, we’ll acknowledge that our disagreements hinder our common mission. They make it hard for us to work together; they can even make it hard for us to pray together. Years ago, one of my Pentecostal college students

visited a Catholic church and described the “so-called prayers” he observed. In his world, if you had to read the words, you weren’t praying.

So let’s be real. Some of our Lancaster Seminary students cannot preach in their churches simply because they are women. Some of our seminarians cannot serve their churches simply because they love people of the same sex.

These days denominations are no longer the issue. The church in the United States is not arguing about episcopal polity, predestination and election. Just *try* to start a fight about one of those topics! We don’t struggle, much, over the eternal security of the believer or the possibility of perfection. A few years ago people were talking about “worship wars” concerning contemporary versus liturgical worship – but we’re past that.

Let’s be real. In this moment, as you go forth into religious leadership, the struggles in the church reflect those of our larger culture. The fights that divide our society as a whole have infected the church. A liberal Presbyterian will likely draw closer to a liberal Lutheran than she will to her conservative Presbyterian sister. Conservative Baptists make common cause with conservative Methodists. In the real world, our church conflicts – let’s be real about this – our church conflicts are little more than reflections of other cultural stresses. Can we be real for a moment here?

#### IV

In 2005 the United Church of Christ was debating a resolution concerning equal rights to marriage for all persons. A conservative leader from Massachusetts spoke just before I did, and I have to say, I disagreed pretty strongly with him. So I said so. But when I sat down beside him, I whispered to him, “Did I treat you fairly?” And this person, who was there precisely to defeat the initiative I represented, patted me on the knee – let’s just say he’s from a different generation – and said, “Yes, you did.”

Jesus’ prayer tells us that we are one, regardless of whether we disagree. Our unity is not a work or a goal; it is a reality grounded in the living, risen Christ. But the prayer goes another step:

Jesus prayed that we would experience love for one another, that same love that unites the persons of the Trinity.

When people outside the church look into the church, that's what they look at. Do we live the gospel we proclaim toward one another? We haven't always been so good at that; even today, people ridicule the church for the nastiness and pettiness of its conflicts – just as the Corinthian Christians embarrassed Paul by taking one another to court. But there have been other days. Christians have sold themselves into slavery in order to purchase the freedom of others. When everyone else fled as plague swept through their cities, Christians stayed put and offered basic nursing care. As Dionysius reported, "*Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.*" Sometimes we have done better. Today we can do better. *You* will do better.

Friends, in ministry – all kinds of ministry – you will disagree. You are *called* to disagree. When you believe the gospel is hindered, when you perceive that justice is stifled, when the forces of death run wild, you must speak up. Martin Luther spoke up. Phoebe Palmer spoke up. Sojourner Truth spoke up. Frederick Douglass spoke up. Gustavo Gutierrez spoke up. You must speak up. Leaders cannot ignore conflict, and they ought not avoid it. But friends, struggle in love. Struggle in love.

To struggle in love means that we will honor the presence of Christ, even in those who seem to be doing wrong. To struggle in love means that we will speak the truth concerning one another, even when twisting their words would be to our advantage. To struggle in love means to look that other person in the eye and speak a word of blessing.

Sisters and brothers, today we scatter. Thank God, the unity of the church does not depend on you or me. It lives in Jesus Christ. And from that same Christ flows the love that unites God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. That is the love that makes us one. Thanks be to God.