

The Gift of Well Informed Leadership

A Baccalaureate Sermon on Acts 2:37-47
for Lancaster Theological Seminary's Class of 2020
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Graduates. *Friends*. For now that you have ended your studies here and are becoming alumni and alumnae, we may now be friends. Speaking of such transitions, how do you feel about endings? I suppose it might depend on the type of ending, or the nature of the thing that is ending. Even so, endings don't seem to fit with my personality. I tend to live in the future: dreaming, innovating, imagining what may come next. Savoring the completion of a project or task is lost as I've already moved on to the next project, the next task, the next idea. I suppose you could call this penchant for always moving to the next thing one of my growing edges. With that in mind, if you have been looking forward to a sermon that would lead you through a meditative savoring of your accomplishment, the culmination of years of study, sacrifice, and hard work, I regret to inform you that this is not the sermon you will be hearing from me this morning.

Yes, baccalaureate is a time of prayer and reflection, a time to give thanks to God for one another and for the educational experiences we have shared, a time to shout and give praise that you've made it to the other side. And it is also an opportunity to take a moment, to look around you at where you have arrived, at what is awaiting you, at what is ahead. Completing a degree results in a re-emergence, a return to life, to living. Here you are, having spent two, three, four years or perhaps more in pursuit of knowledge and learning at Lancaster Theological Seminary. It may not hit you immediately, but the steady realization will roll over you in the coming days and weeks: you've finished. It is complete. You have arrived. Then. It has begun.

Friends, it is an honor and a privilege to be with you now, at this beginning. And what a beginning it is: unlike anything we might have imagined as recently as four months ago. We are still learning how to be together apart, gathering online and worshiping in our separate homes, advised by medical professionals to wear masks when we leave our homes and to stay six feet or two meters away from anyone we do not share a household with. Our hands are raw from washing them frequently, and our eyes are glazed and bloodshot from staring at screens far more than we have been accustomed to. This novel coronavirus and its resulting disease, COVID-19, has forced a new order on our communities, our society, our world. In the midst of chaos, disruption, death, and economic collapse, there lies something else: opportunity. An opportunity for hope, change, reformation, resurrection. This is the setting for your beginning.

In such a time as this, I truly appreciate this morning's reading from Acts, which was also one of the lectionary readings for this week. Perhaps you can relate to the apostle's experiences. They are arguably the first graduating class in the history of theological education; their time as disciples, or students, has ended. Jesus, resurrected from the tomb, had walked with the disciples and ascended into heaven. They are now apostles, charged with sharing what they have learned and teaching others. The Book of Acts tells the story of their beginning, and through their beginning, the birth of the Christian Church.

I invite you to ponder with me the passage we just heard. It is likely a familiar passage to you, as it immediately follows the account of the first Pentecost we remember and celebrate each year. Acts chapter 2 begins with the account of Pentecost, with the flames of the Holy Spirit sweeping among the assembly and understanding dawning across language barriers. Peter steps forward with an explanation: it is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. He imparts his knowledge on the crowd, sharing information about Jesus's life and ministry, interpreting the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, and recounting Jesus's death and resurrection. This is what the crowd has heard when we arrive at verse 37 this morning. With this new

knowledge, new information, the crowd turns to the apostles and ask, "what are we to do now that we know this." The answer Peter gives solidifies this moment as the birth of the church: repent and be baptized.

Scripture goes on to say that because of the apostles' teachings and actions, people came to believe and formed Christian community in response. They shared what they had with those in need, they opened their homes to share simple meals, they praised God and saw the good in others. The passage we heard this morning focuses on the people's response to Peter and the apostles, and this is where I think many of us identify ourselves in the story. We're one of the people in the crowd, hearing the account of Christ Jesus. We believe, we repent, we seek to begin our lives anew in Christ. We are part of the Christian Church, striving to live in community, to be with those in need, to extend goodwill and recognize the good in each other.

And yet. I urge you to look deeper. Look deeper into this passage. Look deeper into yourselves. The Christian Church would not have been born, would not have seen the addition of about three thousand baptized on Pentecost with a steady growth afterward, if it were not for the knowledge and work of the apostles. These students cum teachers, these graduates, provided what the people desperately needed: well-informed leadership. In order to grow, the Church needed leaders with a particular skillset. It needed leaders with knowledge: the disciples had learned much from following Jesus and from their own mistakes along the way. And not only that, the Church needed leaders who could apply knowledge for continued growth and learning: in becoming apostles, they applied what they learned from Jesus to the world around them, to see and respond to needs and also to relate to those they met on their travels. The Church also needed leaders who could communicate their knowledge effectively so that those who heard them might also learn and grow. In proclaiming the Good News of Christ Jesus, the apostles taught what it means to be Christian. Some of these learners and

believers also became teachers and well-informed leaders. That cycle continues to the present day.

Friends. Graduates of Lancaster Theological Seminary. You are recipients of a great gift. A gift of knowledge, shaped by this faculty as we have guided you through conversations with generation upon generation of diverse Christian experience across differences of theology, race and ethnicity, economic situation, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation. You also have received the gift of applying that knowledge to the world around you so that you may continue to grow in your learning and knowledge. Masters students, you will remember integrative studies courses like Church & Social Change, where you applied your learning from theology, biblical studies, and church history to bear on social issues like poverty and mass incarceration. Doctoral students, you will remember the sequence of seminar courses that prepared you to dig deep into a topic and apply your learning to develop real expertise through your major projects. And there is one more gift you have received during your time here. You have received the gift of honing your communication skills so that you may effectively spread the Good News and communicate your knowledge in such a way that it inspires learning and growth in others. The seemingly endless stream of papers, reflections, forum posts, presentations, and other assignments that you have wrestled with during your time here were not just so that we would have something to grade. All of that work, all of our encouragement to you in developing your voice, even our insistence that you cite sources correctly, it all funnels into this gift of effective communication.

As you emerge from the completion of your studies and look around at where you have arrived, take note of this: you are now at a beginning, poised to become a well-informed leader and spiritual inheritor of the apostolic tradition. Your education here has resulted in this tremendous gift of knowledge, the ability to apply that knowledge, and the ability to communicate it effectively. This is a gift given to you so that you may use it to become a gift to

the church and to the world. And if there ever was a time when the church and the world needed the gift of well-informed leadership, now is undoubtedly one of those times. Even before the novel coronavirus came into existence, we were living in challenging times. Fake news is rampant on the Internet, perpetuated through social media by hate and ignorance. More than one denomination is at a theological and ideological impasse, threatening to tear them apart and mirroring a raging national divide over justice issues and social conventions. Social distancing is disrupting and delaying inevitable change on these fronts, while amplifying many more social ills and introducing challenges and changes our society has not seen in a generation. Now is most certainly a time for well-informed leadership.

What might well-informed leadership look like in our present day? The well-informed leader certainly echoes the call of Peter to repent and be baptized. Peter's exhortation to "save yourselves from this corrupt generation," is just as compelling and necessary today as it was in the days of Acts. Yet, I suggest five additional marks of a well-informed twenty-first century leader in the age of global pandemic:

First, this leader is vigilant. Always watching, observing, paying attention. This vigilance also extends beyond the leader's immediate context, to what is happening in neighboring communities and elsewhere. In a world awash with change, transitions, and transformations, vigilance is key.

Second, this leader applies scrutiny. Every bit of information is checked, double-checked, triple-checked for accuracy. Scrutiny dispels false rumors, it questions norms, it challenges misinformation and misperception. It looks for who is speaking and who is being silenced. It seeks truth and honesty.

Third, this leader seeks justice. Vigilance and scrutiny uncover injustices, and this provides an opportunity for new knowledge and greater understanding. To seek justice is to shed light on all that prevents human flourishing, to study the underlying dynamics, and to develop ways forward that result in systemic change.

Fourth, this leader is an advocate. Support for and walking alongside those suffering injustice is a tremendously powerful gift of the well-informed leader. Those are the moments when faith and Gospel are lived.

Fifth and finally, this leader takes action. Showing up, speaking out, embodying love -- this is what comes out of well-informed leadership. It is about being the change you want to see in the world. It is about using your voice, communicating clearly and effectively, so that others may hear, learn, know, and be called to action, too.

Graduates. This isn't an ending. It is a beginning. Take a look around at where you've emerged. The world is under tremendous stress with suffering and need while unarmed Black men are still being gunned down in our streets, transgendered people continue to suffer from prejudice and bias, and many in our churches remain convinced that the commitments and calls of same-gender loving people are not sacred. The list goes on and on. You've been given the gift of knowledge, how to apply it and how to communicate it. It is a gift with responsibilities. It comes with a call to vigilance, scrutiny, justice, advocacy, and action. It demands that you "stay woke" to all that is broken and diseased while leading the way for repair, restoration, and healing. Be the gift of a well-informed leader in whatever shape or context God is calling you to. The church and the world need you. And know that Lancaster Theological Seminary will be there at your back, to support you, encourage you, and celebrate the new life ushered in by your leadership. May it be so. Amen.

Benediction:

Receive now the blessing that comes with the gift of knowledge, the ability to apply that knowledge, and the ability to effectively communicate that knowledge; hear also the call to vigilance, to scrutiny, to justice, to advocacy, to action. Graduates, I pray that you find the strength, courage, and conviction to answer that call and become the well-informed leaders the church and world needs today. Go forth into your new beginning and stay woke.