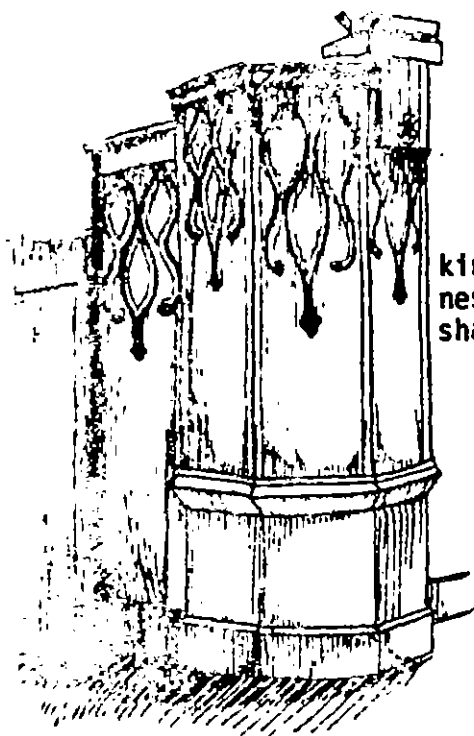


The Southminster Pulpit

"SOME THOUGHTS FOR GRADUATION DAY"



Text: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well."

Matthew 6:33

June 8, 1980

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I come to this sermon with no great expectations whatever. I have been present at at least forty graduation and baccalaureate ceremonies. I have participated in five graduation ceremonies as a student. I have addressed at least a dozen more, and - including those masterful words of my own - I can hardly remember a single thing that anyone has ever said.

I read through a few dozen graduation addresses this past week; and, except for those which were tongue-in-cheek, none of them were memorable either. The single one-liner I remember best was at my Seminary graduation when the speaker said to the students, "You'll never be as smart as you are tonight." But, being innately certain that things can change, I'll bash on anyway to unveil some thoughts for Graduation Day from the Christian pulpit to those graduating this year.

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The first thought I have is one of pride - pride in all of our students. But for the first time in twenty years of ministry, one of the graduates whom we honor is our eldest daughter. Always before I have addressed the graduates of high school and various colleges with conviction and concern in Christ. But, hopeless sentimentalist that I am, this year it is a difficult and different thing entirely, and I have learned much being the father of a graduating high school senior. It is much more personal, much less ethereal; more pointed, more demanding, more touched by tears. How could one ever tell one's child, or children, how wonderful and precious it is to be a parent: the hope for happiness is higher, and the foundation deeper laid in prayer. The first thought for all of us who know and love you graduates each and all is pride.

You are to be commended - You made it! We made

it, too! It does not matter that 3.1 million other young people in American will graduate from high school this spring, or that 920,000 others are receiving their bachelor's degrees this year, or that 400,000 will receive a masters or a professional degree. It does not matter, not to us. We are very proud of you. That pride is more than fluffing feathers; it has to do with what we feel about the future.

The first thought is pride. The second thought is gratitude. How grateful we are for you. How much you fulfill our dreams on the various days when we were born. Fearful that perhaps we have not been good enough as parents, teachers, ministers, but grateful nonetheless. In twenty years of pastoring, I think the greatest joy I have is watching young people grow to maturity and then to embrace the faith and families in which they first arose. This thought is gratitude.

But there is a second kind of gratitude as well: Yours I am speaking of; and I will leave the land of sentiment and venture out to touch what it means to be a graduate of an American school or university this Year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred Eighty. You enter now a world of many fragments, a world devoid of optimism, a world of greater emptiness; but a world of everlasting possibilities.

Back in the Fifth Century B.C. Socrates was writing of the young people of his day:

"Our youths love luxury," he said. "They have bad manners; they have contempt for authority. They contradict their parents. They tyrannize their teachers. They do not respect authority. . . . I worry for the future of the world. The world is going to the dogs."

Twenty-five hundred years ago he wrote that. The dogs are having a long, long wait. . . .

I am a great believer in the young. In things that matter I find each year in my Eighth Grade Communicants class that often students know as much as their parents, maybe even more. By the time high school ends, to say nothing of college or graduate school, there is often no comparison. I trust the coming generation with the future of the world without hesitation. I think they care more and I think they think more. The only wish I have is that I wish it were a better world. I wish it were a safer place. I wish that saner, lovelier people made it all go round.

Erwin Chargaff, the discoverer of DNA, in a recent Harper's Magazine article noticed that almost all of the definitions of our time have attached the prefix "post": A post-industrial age; a post-capitalistic age, a post-Victorian age, a post-moral age - Can we ever dream about a post-war age. . . a post-poverty age, a post-suffering age.

I could lie in the ilk of Pollyanna and tell you that everything is going to be okay; but, frankly, I often fear for the future. You will probably make it, but I fear tremendously for the world your children will inherit; and for my great-great grandchildren, without my religious conviction I could hold out almost no realistic hope at all. We used to know a first grade teacher fifteen years ago, a Scottish Baptist, who used to say that the poorer off the world became the happier she was because it was more likely then that Jesus would return.

"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars," the Bible says, "and nation will rise up against

nation, and there will be famine and earthquakes in various places. Many false prophets will come, and desolating sacrilege will take place. Wickedness will multiply, and men's love will grow cold." That could make you weep, but if you choose to laugh about it I pass it on in the form of a cartoon I saw a few weeks ago. Two bearded prophets were marching down Fifth Avenue. Both had enormous signs: "The end is near. Prepare to meet thy doom." One said to the other - "Have you noticed, Luke, that no one is laughing anymore?"

This could be depressing, but the world I see is a strange and not-so-funny place. Moral anarchy is now so remarkably extensive that, as it said in Judges, everyone did what was right in his and her own eyes, and the judgment of the Lord fell upon them all. Crime in city streets and in the countryside is on the rampage. It is often like a jungle. Our welfare programs have led us from one cul-de-sac to another. The prestige of our nation is so precarious now that soon you will not be welcome anywhere on earth, even with your not-so-almighty dollars. Western civilization shares our lot. Most capitalistic nations are in trouble, many worse than we. The cauldron fomented in Asia is perhaps only worse in Africa, but worst and most immediate is Central and South America. Economic problems, energy, environment, and hunger rule the world, problems of peace and the proliferation of nuclear armaments and untold others. I wish that we had managed a better world for you.

We lived and suffered through the Sixties, watched racial violence catapult us all into a darker world. We thought we were improving, but the echo of the din of the Miami riots will haunt your graduation ceremonies. The battle is not yet won.

In one way I feel I should apologize. We have allowed the world to skid. I say "we" even though at age 44 I don't recall anything I did to hurt or harm the world - a trifle-immodest, to be sure, but I really tried my best and I would have done much more, had I just known what to do. And I don't think my parents either are at fault. I don't know who's to blame.

Our worst failure could be in politics. We have a star here and a star there; occasionally we find an honest man. But we have no choice at all again this year for President. If it were a mock form of government we could laugh about it, but it isn't very funny. In all of my voting lifetime, I have never had a chance to vote for one I really wanted for my President. It gets discouraging, and I guess I hope that some of you might one day enter politics. Who knows? - I would love to be the pastor of the President, especially if it were a woman! You deserve a better world.

But then, as Wycliffe said in his translation of the Bible, you are luckie fellows, and fellowesses. The world will threaten you with problems, but then again the possibilities are there. I was in Boston for the graduating ceremonies at Harvard last Thursday morning - Great day. Great honors for now Dr. Jeffrey Sell of our congregation. I shall never forget the charming young graduating senior Diana Shaw who addressed 20,000 people in Harvard Yard. She began:

"I am a fraud, receiving the honor of this degree and to take company among the fellowship of educated men and women. My grandfather left his Armenian homeland early in this century, crossed two continents and a huge ocean, mastered a new language plus five others, rose to eminence as a man, but was never so honored. . . . and my fourteen-year-old friends in

southern Virginia, who never got to finish high school, but who know what it is to be called a spic or a wop or a kike, or who barely squeak by on the minimum wage of their menial jobs, and still learn to forgive and are proud to be free Americans. They will never be so honored or accepted by the fellowship of educated men and women. The honor of this degree belongs to a lot of other people in the long road which brought me here."

So say we all. We are the debtors, those of us who have been favored. The night I graduated from college my mother said to me as she rushed to get the party ready, "Half of that Diploma, Richard, belongs to me!" Hallelujah, Amen!

You are lucky people, as am I. I would not want you to forget it! In the long unfolding history of God's children on the earth, you are duly favored, truly blessed. If you are not happy, you have yourself to blame.

Our nation has its problems, but then have you noticed lately where the refugees from every corner of the earth all want to go? Have you heard of all the disenfranchised persons in the world - black and white and yellow and brown, male and female and young and old - where they want to live? Who wants to enter Cuba? Has any other nation that you ever heard of had the problems of the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, having to set guards to patrol the shores to slow down awaiting tens of thousands who want to enter there, unless it be Great Britain? Of course not.

The failures of the free society are a burden, to be sure. We have an excess now of freedom, or should I say an excess of little freedoms, which feed those egocentric yearnings to get something more for me and mine. We have allowed a lot of

dreadful things to come. But the excesses of the totalitarian states are worse, much worse - and this whole business proves it. The Iron Curtain still has a big iron fence around it, not to keep others out but to keep its citizens in.

If you look at the long, long road to now, this surely is the best time of all and near enough the best place, and we the last best hope on earth. In other times and places, up to sixty percent of you would have died of hunger or neglect or infant diseases, and only four of ten would be alive to graduate this year. If you had come out of school when your fathers did, you would be off to war in World War II or in Korea or in Vietnam. War may come again, but you are free to plan the future now. You can begin to work in occupations or college or graduate schools. You can marry if you choose, or not. If you had been a woman in years before this year, your future would be chosen for you. You would have had little opportunity to expect the best. We all have a long, long way to go; but we've come a long, long way as well.

If you had graduated fifty years ago today, you would have spent your first ten years waiting for your parents to come home from breadlines in the city streets, and heard them weep at night when they could not give you what you needed. You are a privileged generation. I say it without apology or hesitation. The skills you have and the choices up to you, the quality of education - much as we laugh about it, you have capacities and categories now to deal with things that your parents never heard of. So don't grumble and complain about the things which mystify or terrify you; go out to make them new.

We want you to be happy, but the funny thing is that happiness does not come to those who seek it. Koheleth tells you that back in Ecclesiastes. He

tried everything, and all was vanity until he found a way to use his life for good; then vanity vanished in the wind.

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There are some not so silent secrets you have heard before, but let me put them down in order. . . .

Enjoy life and be happy. Don't ever let your occupation or your home dominate your life. Save some time for you. Often we pretend within the faith that it is wrong to be carefree about the living of your days. We are so organized to do the bidding of the old work ethic Max Weber wrote about; we stress obedience and discipline and service and endless dedication. That is as it must be. But there is also time for fun. We take ourselves too seriously. We are called upon to repent and to renew commitment. But we are also called to relax and to enjoy it all, as befits the followers of one who knew how to laugh as well as how to cry.

People will forever try to make you feel guilty for the time you waste. They will harp about the extravagance of how we spend our money - Why not give it all to feed the poor? They do what they must. But Jesus had an answer. There is a time to lavish life upon each other, to squander it in behalf of friends and family, to laugh and smile and bide awhile - for it passes all too quickly. Most people I know are about as happy as they make up their minds to be. Save some time for happiness; be carefree.

But then be careful as you journey on. Be particular about where you go and what you do and who you choose to do it with. Margaret Mead once cautioned that life is like a parachute jump; you have to get it right the first time or it's goners! You only go 'round once; then it's over. Time's up! The whistle blows.

Be true to yourself. If you compromise yourself, there is nothing left at all. Now that assumes there is an essential self to be true to - in the deep philosophical meaning of the word. To be true to oneself assumes there is a quintessential essence, individually and finally chosen for you, in the aftermath of what it means to be created, to be fashioned out of dust or clay, to take your stance with each and every other one of the teeming billions through the eons since first God breathed the breath of life into that which already looked like man. Do you understand? I mean that I believe God has in view a special life for you to live, not predestined in the detail of your days, not overpowering your right to make a choice, not running slipshod over what you decide to do - but then to be a misfit might be just that simple: to miss the "fit" God had in mind for you alone in the vast gigantic cosmic puzzle which we call the universe of time and space, largely unknown to us but known in full to the One who made it all.

That's mighty and monumental talk, but I could not venture forth in hope another day did I not believe that life itself has meaning. To find it, Browning said, is your daily meat and drink. God made the world. He made it good. It is for us to find and live and share that goodness. There is a part for you to play, an irreplaceable role which you alone can fill, a self to root and grow and then become the one completed person. When Archbishop William Temple said that selfhood is the key to what the universe is all about, although we have neither time nor energy to unravel all he meant, still the beginning notion says it all: When your life was made, God had an individual purpose for it. The whole finger of the universe, Walt Whitman said, all of it is pointing unerringly in one direction: namely to you. Your life is irreplaceable - for now and evermore.

And why that is so important, friends, is even

more important now that you reach another newness in your passing decades. You must allow that self to grow. You must not neglect your inner self or it will simply go its merry way, tapping its toes and twiddling its thumbs, C. S. Lewis said, and wait till life is through. Mostly people do not grow through all their years. They peak on the plateau of their highest educational attainment. Then they are off to make their money or their home or their happiness. Neither do they grow in matters of their faith. I want you to be happy, but more I want you to be holy - not squeaky pious feigned holiness, but down to earth and real life holiness - the kind we see in Christ.

The Bible knows it all. It always has known, it always will know, how cheap and tawdry the world can be. It warns us that the children of darkness are wiser than the children of light. It offers nothing except a life of service and sacrifice; the cost of discipleship requires one life. Happiness is an add-on. Christ knows how we seek other ventures first and save our search for the Kingdom of Heaven until the convenient season when other pleasures and pursuits are over and done, obtained or unobtainable.

So our hearts hanker after excellence. Christ knows it. Apply that excellence to the attainment of our faith. He knows what competitive people so many of us are. He knows our hearts and hopes and lives and days and decades are on the auction block. He knows that earthly possessions dazzle us and drive us insane with an everpresent thirst for more: "If I can only get through school", "If I can only get that job", "If I can only get my degree", "If I can only get into the school I want", "If I can only get my house. . . my wife. . . my husband. . . my anything. . . I will be happy". If only. . . . non-sense! Happiness has little to do with what we have, with the things we get, little to do with what we make. Yet those who have more than enough want more. Have you ever wondered why? . . .

It is a quality of life Christ is speaking of. He knows how anxious we are, so he says "Be not anxious. Oh, for goodness sakes my friends, be not anxious. Do not worry about what you shall eat or what you shall drink or what you shall wear. Life is more than these. Consider the birds of the air, the lilies of the field. Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. . . ."

I do not expect that you will overturn it all. But I do expect you to be more sensitive, more sure, more Christian than your parents, including the one who is speaking here, more loving, more giving to the world. The laugh of it all - and the tear of it all even better maybe - is that the thirst is insatiable. It will never go away. That's why Christ tells us to seek - go ahead. But to seek first the Kingdom of God, and everything falls within its mighty words, will and way. Let every small and accepting moment be an echo. I am often there when life is over, and the ones who really find, the ones who really make it, are the few who learn the lesson of what Jesus Christ was teaching here.

You must become the instruments of change. The greatest travesty of all is to leave things as you found them. Change does not come easily. Frederick Douglas once reminded us that without painful confrontation there is no forward progress in the world. You must have vision enough to see, but you must also have courage enough to act.

You will need a goal. If the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, then the road to success and maturity is paved with realized intentions. You need to be flexible. You need to be ready to dart off the path. You need to amble around and smell the roses, to waste some time with a friend, to be young and even foolish in defense of your right to be a child.

But also, you need to know where you want to go, what destination you have chosen, or you will never get there; and if you do by accident, you will not know where you are. The name of growing up and growing older is knowing what to select, or even better, what to give up, where to emphasize.

You must find a faith to live within, an anchor to hold you through the storm. We all need something to believe in. A spiritual blaze is burning almost everywhere I look. Under every broken dream there is a failure of something to believe in broken too. The shallow world in which we have been forced to live often disappoints us. How did it ever happen? It all should be so easy. What my father used to say of me applies to all of us: "For one so smart, you sure are dumb." You need something to believe in; why not choose the best something which there is.

The earliest printed rules of our oldest university announced the purpose of an education three hundred years ago this way: "Everyone shall consider the mayne end of his life and studies, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life." Wesley said that is all you need to know - "how to get from here to there". How to bridge the gap between these few transitory fleeting years and the ultimate destination. "I'm like an arrow now," he added, "shot across the water, to fall I know not where, but when I fall at last I want to know the joy of being home" - that and nothing more!

A bit otherworldly, to be sure, too heavenly directed for some if not the most of you. What of it, friends? I should fail you as your pastor if I did not tell you, warn you of the seriousness with which Christ took this mortal life - a journey, worthwhile, important, final, but a journey nonetheless.

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Your graduation follows closely the enormous eruption of Mt. St. Helens, one of the most dramatic and worrisome events in all the history of the earth. Too much can be made of it, I am sure, but I want to end with it. This horrid cataclysmic reminder of the fiery center of the planet earth, this dreadful illustration of the shifting and ultimately unstable foundation which shakes and trembles with the swelling thereof - it comes as a reminder of how frail and fragmentary is the terra firma on which we move and live and walk and wait and hope and sing and cry. I use it as a hint, just a whispered reminder that the world could end for any one of us tonight. Then, where is your anchor? Then what do you have?

You are at a most advantageous time, my friends, my dear beloved daughter. You are at the advantageous point where you can ask, "What can I do with life? What can I make of it? What can I add to the forward movement? What can I do to make it all worthwhile? What can I do so that I do not add to the immense dead-weight which nature drags along?" Soon enough the tense will change and the question will become: "What have I done? Where is the life we lose in the living?" The horror of so many of your parents' generation who wake up when it is mostly gone and say, "Oh my God. I've lost it. Where did it go? What have I done? What do I have to show for forty years on earth? Would it all have been the same without me, and will it be the same still after I am gone?"

I would not want you to have to face the loneliness of that unanswered question, the emptiness which will not go away, when you feel your life has been a waste of time. Shortly before his death in the horrors of the Nazi camp at Dachau, Deitrich Bonhoeffer wrote these marvelous words based upon the Scripture:

"Do not be anxious for the world and all that you see within it. Be anxious only for the Christ and the faith he calls you to. For after he has been following Christ for a long time, the disciple of Jesus will be asked, 'Lacked ye anything?' And he will answer, 'Nothing, Lord.'" For he who endures to the end, the Bible says, will be saved. Some few make it. I would want you to be within their number. For the road leading to destruction is wide, and the number who choose it are many. But the path which leads to Home is narrow; the road to excellence is always lonely, and those who choose it are few. "After he has been following Christ for a long time, the disciple of Jesus will be asked, 'Lacked ye anything? Did you miss anything? Are you sorry for anything? Do you need anything more than you have?' And he will answer, 'Nothing, Lord. In you I have everything I need.'"

You move up the ladder now. For the most part it is time to live away from home. . . to venture out into a future as yet unknown. God grant it will be good to you, that you will use it wisely, now and evermore. Amen.

This sermon is printed as preached from the Southminster Pulpit, and was not edited for publication.