

May 23, 2010
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Spiritual Literacy
The Qualities of a Spiritual Life: Curiosity
Ephesians 3.14-19, 4.1

Today we celebrate graduates and send them into the next adventure of their lives with our prayers and love. Graduation ceremonies usually have a commencement speaker offering words of wisdom.

Apparently Kermit the Frog was the commencement speaker at one college where one of the students was disappointed and said, "I've worked my butt off for four years to be addressed by a sock." Kurt Vonnegut, when he addressed the students at MIT, said, "The best advice I can offer you is to wear sunscreen and remember to floss."

I love what Anna Quindlan said to the graduates of Villanova University, "You walk out of here with only one thing no one else has. Thousands of people will have your degree and do what you do for a living. You will be the only person alive who has sole custody of your life...not just the life of your mind, but the life of your heart...not just the life of your bank account but the life of your soul. So, here's what I want to tell you today : GET A LIFE. A real life...a soul life...not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house, the next vacation...get a life that is generous...realize that life is a gift and you have no business taking it for granted. Care so deeply and passionately about its goodness that you want to spread it around. It is so easy," she said, "to exist instead of live...get a life...a life large enough for your heart and your soul!"

Well, another year has gone by, and no one has asked me to be their commencement speaker...not even kindergarten

graduation...so you're stuck with me today living out my fantasy giving a commencement address...not just to our graduates, but to all of us because we are all sent into this world, to use a phrase from our Bible reading today, "to lead lives worthy of our calling." Today is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church, the day we pray for God's Spirit to reignite a sense of passion and fire in our bellies, a hope in our hearts, and a sense of calling in our lives. Theologian Len Sweet asks, "Can the church stop its puny, hack dreams of trying to make a difference in the world and start dreaming God-sized dreams of making a different world trusting in the God whose Spirit is present within you and who believes in you more than you even believe in yourself."

Did you catch today's reading?: "With God's Spirit present and working within us we can accomplish abundantly more than we can even imagine."

Today's Bible reading is a prayer from Paul to the church at Ephesus...may God give you strength, not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength...this is a prayer for our graduates today and a prayer for us all.

I want to highlight a couple phrases from this prayer. First, "May you be rooted and grounded in love."

Take a deep breath and rest in the knowledge and assurance that you are a child of God...you are loved...you are cherished...your life already has infinite worth and value...and nothing can change that and no one can take that from you. Jesus said, "You are light." I asked on Facebook and Twitter to prepare for today, "What is the one piece of advice you would offer graduates?" The most frequent response, "Know that your value and worth is not tied to your work or what you do."

There is a very loud voice in our culture that says, “Prove that you are worthy...your worth can only be measured in what work you do, what you accomplish, what you achieve, how much money you have, how successful or popular you are.” This voice leads to self-centeredness, materialism and anxiety and fear and depression and this voice will continue to shout at you demanding your attention. And you listen to that voice and try to fill that God-shaped hole inside you with things that don’t satisfy.

There is another voice deep inside of you...to hear this voice requires special effort. It requires prayer and silence, and a strong determination to listen ...a voice that reminds you of a truth that already is and can never be taken from you... a voice that whispers you are God’s child...God’s beloved. God is for you!

Fred Craddock, a famous preacher, told the story when he and his wife were on vacation, dining at a quiet little restaurant in the great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee.

They’d been looking forward to a quiet, private dinner, just the two of them. As they waited for their meals, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired gentleman moving from table to table speaking to guests. Craddock whispered to his wife, “ I sure hope he doesn’t come over here.”

But Craddock’s wish was not granted...the elderly gentleman stopped at Craddock’s table and asked, “Are you here on vacation? Where ya’ll from?”

“We’re from Oklahoma.”

“Splendid state. What do you do in Oklahoma?”

In his head, Fred was saying, “Please leave us alone...we don’t know who you are , and frankly, we don’t really care.”

But what came out of his mouth was, “I teach preaching at a seminary.”

“Oh, so you teach preachers to preach. Well I have a story I want to tell you.” And the old man pulled up a chair and sat down as Craddock groaned inside thinking to himself, “Why didn’t I say I was a plumber.”

The man stuck out his hand and said, “I’m Ben Hooper. I grew up not far from here in these mountains. My mother wasn’t married when I was born and so I had a pretty rough go of it. The whole community knew it – I was what they called an illegitimate child. Back then that was a shame so I was ashamed. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school the children said mean and ugly things to me and ostracized me.

When I was about 12 years old a new preacher came to our church. I started going to hear him preach. I don’t know exactly why but it stirred something in me. But I was afraid that I wasn’t welcome there, since I was who I was. So I’d go in just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I’d leave quickly because I was afraid that some one would stop me and say, ‘What’s a boy like you doing in our church?’

One Sunday the preacher said the benediction so fast I couldn’t do my usual quick exit. And before I could make it to the door, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand.

It was the minister. I looked up and he was looking right at me. I could feel every eye in the church staring right through me. ‘Who are you son? Whose boy are you?’

I know what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my daddy was. Wouldn’t you know it? Even the minister was

going to humiliate me. But as he looked at me, studying my face he began to smile a big smile of recognition...as if he already knew.

‘Wait a minute,’ he said, ‘I know who you are. I see a striking resemblance, boy. You are a child of God.’ Then he patted me on the shoulder and said, ‘Boy, you’ve got an inheritance. You go and claim it.’

The old man looked across the dinner table at Fred Craddock and said, ‘That was the most important single sentence ever spoken to me. I left the church a different person that morning. In fact, it was really the beginning of my life.’

With that the gentleman stood up, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife and moved on to the next table. It was then that Craddock remembered that the people of Tennessee had elected an illegitimate child to be their Governor, not once but twice, and Ben Hooper was his name.

May you be rooted and grounded in the knowledge that you are a child of God...beloved...worthy...cherished...nothing can change that and nothing can take that from you.

Let’s look at another phrase from Paul’s prayer...from being rooted and grounded in love...reach the heights and plumb the depths.

In a study at the University of Wisconsin, a group of 1000 people all over the age of 90 were asked, “If you had to live your life over again, what would you do differently?”

Do you know what the number one answer was? They said, “I would take more risks. I wouldn’t be so afraid of failure. I would invest more of my life in causes worth risking for.”

As Helen Keller said, ‘Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.’”

I love the story of the man, who received several awards for achieving major breakthroughs in the search for a cure for cancer. He was asked the secret of his success. He told a story of when he was 3 or 4 years-old. He wanted a glass of milk so he was getting a jar of milk from the refrigerator and dropped it and it shattered. His mother came running into the kitchen. How would you have responded?

He said the crash scared him and he was about to cry when his mother picked him up and said, “Wow! What a wonderful sea of milk. What a wonderful mess!”

She laughed and told her son to stand over to one side while she cleaned up the broken glass. She then asked her son whether he wanted to use a mop, sponge or towel to clean up his mess. After they cleaned up his mother grabbed an empty bottle of milk and said, “Let’s fill this up with water and go to the backyard so you can practice this skill.”

This researcher said, “I learned at an early age that it’s okay to make mistakes. I learned not to be afraid to fail. I learned that life is messy and chaotic...there’s no such thing as perfect...creativity emerges from the chaos. I learned to always be curious because there is always something to learn. Innovation,” he said, “is trial and error...learning from your mistakes...trying something new...open to new possibilities.” He said, “If you are worried about being judged or afraid of failing, it’s impossible to be creative.”

Dewitt Jones, a photographer for National Geographic said, “You can look at the world in fear and see all the ways something is not

likely to work or you can look at the world with never-ending curiosity exploring the possibilities that are there.”

It says in the very first chapter of the Bible, “In the beginning God began to create...and God continues to create...and that creative spirit and energy is present in you.

May you be inspired...inspiration means to breathe in Gods breath, to breathe in God’s creative energy, to breathe in God’s Spirit of love, the same Spirit that was in Jesus...the same Spirit working in you that is able to accomplish abundantly more than you can even imagine...the same Spirit that calls you to a purpose greater than yourself...that calls you to not just make a difference but to partner with God in daring to believe this is the generation that will make a different world.

So, let me finish with the wisdom of Dr. Seuss.

Did I tell you before about the Zoad
Who came to two signs at the fork in the road
One said to place one;the other place two
So the Zoad had to make up his mind what to do.
Well, the Zoad scratched his head, his chin, his pants
And said to himself, “I’m taking a chance.
If I go to place one it may be too hot
And how do I know if I’ll like it or not?

On the other hand, I’d be some sort of fool
If I go to place Two and find it too cool.
On the other hand though,
If place One is too high I might get a terrible earache and die.
Place Two must be best. On the other hand though,
If place Two is too low I might get some strange pain in my toe.
Place One must be best and he started to go.

Then he stopped and said, “On the other hand,

The other hand, the other hand, though...”
And for 36 hours and a half that poor Zoad
Made stops and starts at the fork in the road
Saying “Don’t take that chance, it might not be right”
Then he got an idea that was wonderfully bright.

“Safe!” cried the Zoad. “I’ll play safe, I’m no dunce.
I’ll simply start out for both places at once.”
And that’s how the Zoad who would not take a chance
Got no place at all, with a split in his pants.

So, today, if it be you at the fork in the road –
Not sure whether to risk it – just like the Zoad –
Look in the mirror and dare to see –
A child of God filled with courage and creativity –
As the roads of tomorrow wait to be taken –
May the Spirit within you refuse to be shaken!