

For Leo Brown and Grace Baptist: A Commencement Address from Jesus and Me
Matthew 10: 7-14,16.

We honor and celebrate Leo today on his high school graduation. This is the season of Commencement Addresses around the nation, and I enjoy listening in on what is being said to students embarking on the next chapter of their lives. So, for today I have invited myself to deliver a Commencement Address: to Leo and to Grace, a Commencement Address from Jesus, me and a few friends.

We are all, whether we know it or not, about to commence on some new chapter of our lives. As the saying goes: Today is the first day of the rest of your life. We are all on the verge of something! And it could be something good, something vital, life giving.

I

So first, some words to Leo. I remember how Peter Gomes, the preacher at Harvard Memorial Church for many years, began his Commencement Address at my daughter Ann's graduation from Furman. His first word of advice was: "It's the SECOND mouse that gets the cheese." Think about it. First is not always best. His second word of advice, in his booming black aristocratic voice was, "It's not 'Who you know', it's 'WHOM you know!'"

I would add a few more. “Seek the truth wherever it leads without fear, for God is the author of all truth.” Be fearless in your search for truth.

And this: Be who you are, who God has made you to be and called you to be. This takes no little courage. The poet e.e.cummings wrote:

“To be nobody-but-yourself in a world trying, day and night, to make you everybody-else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

Leo, we celebrate who you are and who you are becoming! We love your high spirits and bravery!

And I would add to this, since you and all of us were created in the image of God, we learn our truest self by looking at God and Jesus.

Now to Grace Baptist, a word about the elixir of learning, learning all our life long: in T.H. White’s book of the King Arthur stories, *The Once and Future King*, Merlin says:

“The best thing for being sad...is to learn something. That’s the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds.

There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.”

II

Now to Jesus and his imperatives, his essential and urgent things for all of us here. Kathleen Norris, poet and spiritual writer, captures the essence of them in her poem, “Imperatives”:

Look at the birds

Consider the lilies

Drink ye all of it

Ask

Seek

Knock

Enter by the narrow gate

Do not be anxious

Judge not; do not give to dogs what is holy

Go: be it done for you

Do not be afraid

Maiden, arise

Young man, I say, arise

Stretch out your hand

Stand up, be still

Rise, let us be going

Love

Forgive

Remember me.¹

Those words of Jesus are a blueprint for our futures on this day of commencement. Let's pause for a moment with them.

“Look at the birds/ Consider the lilies/Do not be anxious.” Open your eyes to the God who provides. As Wendell Berry ends a poem: “All you need is here.”

“Ask/Seek/Knock”. God is ready to answer, ready to be found, ready to open the door. As the writer of the Hebrews says, “Therefore let us go with boldness before the throne of God.

“Enter by the narrow gate.” The crowd is generally going the wrong way. As the poet wrote: “I took the road less traveled, and that has made all the difference.” Narrow sometimes can be good.

“Judge not; do not give to dogs what is holy”. Judging others can ruin your day and mess up your mind. We get plank-in-eye disease as we try to remove the splinter from another’s eye. Take the plank out! Now, as for not giving to dogs what is holy: your holy personhood is at stake here. Don’t let it be used by others, damaged by others, trampled on by others.

“Stretch out your hand.” There are few words of wisdom more important than this: “I need help”.

“Rise / Stand up / Let us be going.” I think Jesus means “now”!

“Love”. This, Jesus said, is the heart of it all. The love of God and the love of neighbor. First, the love of God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Don’t forget the imperative to love God with our minds! We don’t check our brains at the front door of the church as we enter. I’ve heard it said, “It doesn’t take a great mind to be a Christian, but it takes all the mind you’ve got!”

Second, that which makes the love commandment complete: “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Or, as we might say today: Love your neighbor as you love your “*selfie!*”

“Forgive”, yes. Forgive and set yourself free!

Then, the last of them: “Remember me”. We are so lucky to have the opportunity of a lifelong conversation with Jesus. It makes more difference than we know.

III

I have three more imperatives from what I call Jesus’ “commencement address”, his instruction to his disciples as he sent them out into the world: Travel Light, Shake the Dust, Be Wise as Serpents and Innocent as Doves.

First, Travel Light. Take no gold or silver, he said. Wear one change of clothes. There are two lessons here. The first is, learn your dependency on others. We all need one another. You cannot make it all alone. The second is, the less baggage you carry around, the better. I’m talking about emotional and psychological baggage. And I’m talking about possessions, things. Both kinds of baggage can wear you out. In 1845 there was a British expedition to the North Pole where none returned. In their diaries we learn that they had been weighed down by what they could not leave behind: they had brought china place settings, backgammon and chess boards, sterling silver flatware, silk scarves— and they died trying to carry all that baggage to the pole. By the time they realized they were in trouble, it was too late. A parable of our lives?²

Shake the Dust. When people will not welcome you or reject you, shake the dust from your shoes and move on. There are some people who will never bless

you and whom you cannot bless. Don't spend your life trying to win them over. And when you have failed in life, accept the failure and move on to where God can use you!

Be Wise as Serpents and Innocent as Doves. As he sent them out, he said, "I send you as sheep among wolves." You will meet opposition, and there will be people who mean you harm. Be smart about it. And stay innocent. Innocent?! Yes, the innocence of pure motives, of transparency and of sincerity, and of a non-violent way of life.

Then, there is the ever-Golden Rule. There is a form of it in most religious traditions. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" Or as in Wendell Berry's ecological paraphrase, "Do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you!" The Islamic version from the Koran is: "No person has faith until they love for their neighbor what they love for themselves." What a comprehensive ethic by which to live: *Love for others what you love for yourself!*

One more: Give into Joy. Do you know happiness is waiting for you? It may even be traveling to see you today. As Jesus was summing up his teaching in John's gospel he said: "I have come that you may have joy, and that your joy may be overflowing." Overflowing. In her poem "Don't Hesitate", Mary Oliver says to us this graduation day, this first day of the rest of our lives:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy
don't hesitate, Give into it
Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid
Of its plenty: Joy is not made to be a crumb.³

For generations, the Hebrew people endured as captives in Babylon. When they returned home, they gathered by the Water Gate in Jerusalem and heard the words of the Bible, The Torah, the Teaching, read aloud to them. Some hadn't heard it for a long time. Some had never heard those words. They began to weep and mourn, some with guilt over having broken the Teaching, others with remorse for mistakes they had made, mistakes which had harmed others and harmed themselves.

Nehemiah the prophet stood and said: "Do not be sad. *The joy of the Lord is your strength!* Let the party begin!" Some of you may be afraid of happiness, afraid you don't deserve it. Some may not trust happiness, or trust it to stay. But joy is yours, it is the gift of God, and that joy will be your strength.

IV

One of our favorite followers of Jesus is the writer Anne Lamott. Many of us have read the Commencement Address she gave a few years ago at the University of California, Berkeley. She began:

“This must be a magical day for you. I wouldn’t know. I accidentally forgot to graduate from college. I meant to, 30 years ago, but things got away from me. I did graduate from high school — do I get partial credit for that? Although unfortunately, my father forgot to pay the book bill, so at the graduation ceremony, when I opened the case to see my diploma, it was empty. Except for a ransom note that said, see Mrs. Foley, the bookkeeper, if you ever want to see your diploma alive again.”

And she closed with these two words: Rest and Laughter. “Rest and laughter” she said, “are the two most spiritual and subversive acts of all.” She calls laughter “carbonated holiness”, the belly laughs, our gentle laughter at ourselves. And of rest, she says, “slow down” or better, “lie down.”

So today I end with the words, On Your Mark. Get Ready. Rest! Take a nap, then, carry in your nap sack, laughter.

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1. Kathleen Norris, *Little Girls In Church* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 62.
 2. Annie Dillard, “An Expedition to the Pole”, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1982), 24.
 3. Mary Oliver, “Don’t Hesitate”, *Devotions* (N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2017), 61.

