

Commencement

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Eric Marinus Nelson □ First Congregational Church of Minnesota UCC □ 7 September 2008

□.□.□.

In May our son graduated from college. It was a fine weekend, and his parents were very proud. (Still are.) We did the usual things—the stroll around campus, dinner with the girlfriend and her parents, attending what they called the “baccalaureate” ceremony.

Once upon a time, a baccalaureate was a worship service. This surely dates from the day when many colleges assumed (in a way that now strikes us, what... quaint? imperious? oblivious?) that Christianity covered all bases. In recent years, as religion on campus has become more self-aware, baccalaureate ceremonies have changed, sometimes sublimely, sometimes... well, less so. On some campuses, baccalaureates are now interfaith. At our son’s newly claimed alma mater, it’s a talent show. Why they’ve kept the name I have no idea. Postmodern hip, I guess.

But I digress.

We did the usual things... which of course included going to Commencement. Commencement. Beginning. A looking forward to what is yet to come, even as everyone is looking back nostalgically on the years that laid the foundation for this vista of the Promised Land. Often commencement speakers are pretty boring. This one wasn’t. He was the poet Dana Gioia, who is also head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and he did a good job of inspiring the graduates to stretch themselves, to take risks, not to play it safe. Quoting Rilke I think he said he was doing when he told them, “Jump off a cliff and grow your wings on the way down.”¹ Maybe a few middle-aged parents, overhearing his message, took him to heart, too.

I thought about commencement speeches as I read today’s passages from Matthew and Romans. I even got inspired to read other commencement speeches in the Bible, from Moses’ last words in Deuteronomy to Jesus’ farewell discourse in the Gospel According to John. For while commencement addresses do mark a departure, they focus more on the community of hearers embarking on some new stage of being.

In case you didn’t catch it in the paraphrase that Marguerite read from, the Matthew passage was the one people semi-quote from when they say that wherever two or three are gathered, Christ is there. The context is actually in the settling of disputes, not in people simply getting together. If this is really attributable to Jesus, it’s part of his effort to advise his followers on how to keep their community healthy and on track. Every one of Paul’s letters is in the same vein.

And here’s my last digression of the day:

It may be a bit ironic that of all the church leaders through the ages, Paul is surely the worst offender when measured by what we now call professional boundaries. He traveled all over, founding churches in what are now Turkey, Greece, Italy, probably Spain. Nowadays the standard is that once you leave a congregation, you leave things alone. After Paul left, he kept meddling,

¹ A Google search indicates that maybe he was paraphrasing Robert Bly.

correcting, advising—writing letters to the churches he'd founded, telling them how to keep true to what he taught them. We've benefited from his letters (to be fair, we've also suffered from parts of them), but Paul's letters had to be frustrating to the leaders he left behind in Rome or Corinth or wherever. At some point surely someone wanted to take him aside and say, "Paul, you *left*, remember? Now leave it to us. Trust that God will be at work here in ways that even you can't foresee." I will not be writing you letters after I leave, telling you how to carry on your ministries in this place.

Counting today, I have three sermons to give before I go my way in October. In a way these sermons are all of a piece. Consider this one my Pauline letter, my commencement address. For a commencement this is. Things are just starting here, both in the immediate sense of this being the start of a new program year and in the congregation being on the verge of a new stage of its long life and ministry. We also dedicate new spaces and improvements in our building today and , look forward to another generation of ministry and open welcome at the corner of Fifth Street and Eighth Avenue SE.

For those who are visiting today, this may also give you some insight into what kind of community this is, beyond who stands in this pulpit on a given Sunday.

So...

Members of the Class of 2008. Dearly beloved. Brothers and sisters in the community of First Church. Honored guests and visitors. From Eric, one of your pastors and teachers from these past several years, and Jennie's colleague. Grace and peace to you. My focus this morning is not on what is past. It is on what lies ahead for you in this place.

First of all, be ever aware of the visitors among you. You may be entertaining angels unawares (as another once wrote) or tomorrow's longtime friends. Welcome the stranger with genuine hospitality, for in so doing you reflect the love of God as shown in Jesus Christ, who ate and drank and shared conversation with everyone who came into his presence. Who embraced fishermen and tax collectors and women, blue collar and white collar and pink, the learned and the unschooled, the wealthy and the poor. Who touched and healed those who were pushed to the margins. Who embraced the little children. Who defied the powerful who would do others harm. Who was respectful in his resistance even to Pontius Pilate. Who poured out his life in love for all people, and in whom we see God revealed.

Welcome the stranger, for you yourself had to pass no test to be welcomed here.

Remember the saints who have been among you, the Doris and Floyd Nelsons who greeted you when first you crossed this threshold, the ambassadors of love who made you feel welcome.

Many people long for an accepting community. Many have been rejected by their families or their churches for being who they are. For some it was because of sexual orientation. How painful for who you are and whom you love to be the very reasons for being rejected. For some their estrangement has come from being ignored, discounted, written out of the cherished history of the faith because everything was oriented around men and maleness. For still others, degradation has been a constant because of race or ethnicity.

Realize how much you can learn from people who are different from you. Be grateful when others open your eyes to things you cannot see yourself, such as your own privilege and power, granted by race or inheritance or the opportunities that were available to you more than to others. Compare your privilege not with those who have more but with those who have less. Assume that God's starting point is with those less fortunate than you and go from there, for it makes all the difference. Jesus was born a refugee in an occupied country, targeted for a violence that eventually caught up with him, both for who he was and for who people feared him to be. The transcendent ones are always the biggest threat to the powerful. It's no wonder that the transcendent ones, the godly ones, identify with those who are most vulnerable.

Do not be afraid. Fear is the tool of the desperate in their effort to deceive, to control, and to destroy, and timidness is the excuse of the unimaginative. Courage is the Spirit's gift in response, a whisper of God's presence, confidence, and holy fire.

Be bold. Test the limits. And above all, trust in forgiveness. Trust not only in the availability of mercy and pardon, but also in their transformative power. Forgive others, certainly, but also give others opportunities to forgive you. Admit your faults and your mistakes, for pardon softens the heart of both the giver and the receiver. It is God's grace that makes God who God is, and forgiveness allows us to embrace our humanity and make peace with our imperfection. When it comes to pardon, it is blessed both to give *and* to receive.

Trust the soft things more than the hard, change more than permanence, for God is not rigid, and human life entails the shedding of old skin.

Dare to believe in great things, and cast your lot with transformation. People have to believe in great things for them to come about, or for people even to notice when they do. Resurrection was impossible, and then people saw it and believed in it, and the world has never been the same.

Honor your doubts. Don't believe in something simply because others say you must. You may be on to something that they have no inkling of. But do not make doubt into its own temple. Doubts are shelters on a mountain trail. Way-stations, not final resting places. In that way they're not all that different from beliefs, which must also be open to change, for we know only in part.

Honor the beliefs of others. Treat them as respectfully as you wish yours to be respected. Seek the truth in the Muslims' saying that God made us all different so that we might come to know one another.

Celebrate truth stumbled upon in unexpected places—in another's religion, in a new insight into your own, in a child's wisdom, a Freudian slip, in communion with nature or in a protest march, in an otherwise truly bad movie or play. For epiphanies abound for those who are open to them, and nobody expected good things to come out of Nazareth, either.

Finally, find the poetry and the narrative beneath the bare facts. Today we celebrate the completion of a lot of building work—including rebuilt windows, a new ramp and doorway. But in a more important way, what we celebrate today is light and welcome, beauty and inclusiveness, presence and promise. All the work that has been completed, like all the coursework in earning a degree, looks forward to more ministry in this place, in this community, with these people and with those who will come after us. All the work that we have done together—in this capital campaign of the past four

years and in the ministries we've inherited and shared in many more—form a firm foundation for all that lies ahead, by the grace of God and in reflection of the love of Christ. Which makes this day both a commencement and a continuation, and a moment of grateful celebration.