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PURSUING PEACE AND BUILDING UP ONE ANOTHER

Baccalaureate Sermon
Lynchburg College
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The Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

Romans 14:17-19

It is an honor to be able to deliver this Baccalaureate sermon to you. I am grateful for the opportunity to be here this evening and also grateful to be a part of your Commencement tomorrow.

Even though this is my first visit to your lovely campus, I have long felt a real connectedness with you.

First of all, there is a strong Disciples connection. In the 1960's, I was development director for Tougaloo College in Mississippi. This predominantly African-American school is jointly aligned with the United Church of Christ and the Disciples. I opened the college's first development office in New York City.

In 1973, Linda and I accepted an assignment with the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to do development work with the Church of Christ of Zaire, in Central Africa.

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That work became the foundation stone on which all of the overseas work of Habitat for Humanity has been built. And, it is now very extensive, with Habitat houses being built in over a hundred locations in thirty-four countries around the world in addition to the building being done in more than seven hundred towns and cities in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Beyond the denominational connection, I feel a sense of kinship with you because of your work with Habitat for Humanity. You formed the first Campus Chapter of Habitat in Virginia and one of the first in the nation. And, you have done a great job of building with the very dynamic Habitat affiliate in Lynchburg in addition to sending building teams to other Habitat locations.

I also feel at one with you because of the strong emphasis at Lynchburg College on global concerns, caring for others, working for positive changes within individuals and in the world and, finally, I feel so very connected with you because of the value placed and taught here on the importance and power of collaboration and of team effort. Increasingly, in our complex world, things of worth and value come about only through a team effort. In Habitat for Humanity, we know so well how totally essential team effort is to building, especially on our frequent blitz-building campaigns.

So, graduates, faculty, administration, family and friends, we stand on a lot of common ground. And, here is what I have on my heart and mind to share with you.

I want to talk about pursuing and building. More specifically, I want to talk about pursuing the things which make for peace and building up of one another.

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First, pursuing. Pursuing means going after, chasing. To pursue is to have a goal. Inherent in pursuing is change. There is the beginning of a pursuit, the middle, and the end.

When I was a boy, I often went hunting in the back woods of east Alabama. I pursued possums. The beginning of the pursuit was getting out the lantern, a strong flashlight and a hound dog with a good nose. Then, the hunt started. The dog would run across a cold possum trail and begin to bark. Slowly at first, but as the trail got hotter, the barking would get faster and louder. Finally, there would be loud howling because the possum had been "treed". I would run through the bramble briars and underbrush to reach the dog. Then, the tree had to be shaken or climbed, depending on its size. The object was to get the possum on the ground and into my sack. You see, possums are caught alive to be fattened up before they are ready for "possum and taters".

Anyway, a possum hunt is just one example of a pursuit. Many other things are pursued in life--a date for Saturday night, good grades, passing grades, a position on an athletic team, a lifetime mate, a particular political office, money, prestige, control, a college degree, a job.

All of you graduates here this evening have achieved the goal of a college degree. Your pursuit has been successful. Many already have jobs lined up. Others are still pursuing. Some of you will continue your educational careers, going on for higher degrees. Some have already found a marriage partner. Others are still looking. Some have given up, temporarily or permanently. Some of you have money, others are "minus money"!

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But, all of you stand on the same level ground in the sense of having achieved a college degree. I applaud you and commend you for that significant accomplishment in your life.

Pursuit, by definition, means constant change, and, to be successful, hard work and dedication.

When I was in high school in Lanett, Alabama, I had a silver-haired teacher, Miss Lucy Meadows. She loved to quote poetry. And, one poem she quoted so often that even today, forty years later, I can close my eyes and see her standing in front of the class solemnly intoning, "The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night."

The message of that bit of poetry made a powerful impact on me. I hope it impacts you.

There is another dimension to a pursuit. A spiritual dimension. We human beings aren't totally in control of anything. The truly intelligent person realizes that. The best laid plans can go astray. The most exciting pursuit can put the possum up a tree that's virtually impossible to climb, or, worse yet, the trail can be lost completely.

Sickness, death, disease, betrayal, trickery, a sudden firing, are all a part of life and interrupt our pursuits with amazing regularity.

Therefore, a spiritual dimension to our various pursuits is essential to make sense of what life is all about. A faith that God ultimately is a guiding hand in our personal lives and in human affairs is so necessary to successful and victorious living, and triumphant dying.

As you go out from this place tomorrow, I challenge you to pursue your dreams with all the vigor and enthusiasm you possess. But, I

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admonish you to do so with two things in mind. First, pursue those things which make for peace, always seeking the guiding hand of God in all of your endeavors and second, try, in everything you do, to build up people. Build up society. Make things better than they were when you found them.

You are graduating at an amazing time in history. Sweeping changes have recently occurred in Central and Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Empire. And, the stage is set for vast changes to occur in Southern Africa. Technological breakthroughs continue to unfold with almost breathtaking speed. You will have an opportunity to have a positive impact on these and other emerging changes in our world.

I am a believer in human progress. I do not agree with those who say that life is an endless wheel of birth, sickness, death and meaningless activities that lead nowhere.

I agree with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who wrote in his "Psalm of Life",

"Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!--
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
was not spoken of the soul."

And, I agree with the great theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch, who wrote about the progress of the Kingdom of God, an ever present and yet future kingdom and about the social gospel, in his last and greatest book, A Theology for the Social Gospel:

"The social gospel has an inherent interest in history. Individualistic theology sees everywhere countless sinful individuals who must all go through the same process of repentance, faith, justification, and regeneration, and who in due time die and go to heaven or hell. The historical age in which a person lived, or the social class or race to which he belonged, matters little. This religious point of view is above time and history. On the other hand the social gospel tries to see the progress of the Kingdom of God in the flow of history; not only in the doings of the Church, but in the clash of economic forces and social classes, in the rise and fall of despotisms and forms of enslavement, in the rise of new value-judgments and fresh canons of moral taste and sentiment, or the elevation or decline of moral standards. Its chief interest is the Kingdom of God; and the Kingdom of God is history seen in a religious and teleological way. Therefore the social gospel is always historically minded. Its spread goes hand in hand with the spread of the historical spirit and method."

My spiritual mentor, the late Dr. Clarence Jordan, the man who, with his wife, Florence, founded Koinonia Farm, a Christian community in South Georgia, talked often about the Kingdom of God as "The God Movement". He said that Americans have a difficult time relating to "Kingdoms" because we don't have kings, and queens, princes and

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princesses. We have movements--the Civil Rights movement, the Women's Liberation movement, and so forth.

He said that God has something going on in the world and we should extend our "spiritual antennas" to pick up the message from heaven and then act accordingly.

Walter Rauschenbusch expressed the same idea in his book I quoted earlier:

"All Christian discussions of the past and the future must be religious, and filled with the consciousness of God in human affairs. God is in history. He has the initiative. Where others see blind forces working dumb agony, we must see moral will working toward redemption and education. A religious view of history involves a profound sense of the importance of moral issues in social life. Sin ruins; righteousness establishes, and love consolidates. In the last resort the issues of future history lie in the moral qualities and religious faith of nations. This is the substance of all Hebrew and Christian eschatology."

Yes, God is in history, but He works through people. He works through graduates of Lynchburg College. And, the challenges and problems you are inheriting are enormous. While much progress has been made in breaking down old barriers and creating a new and better world order, much remains to be done. Communist dictatorships still rule the day in China, Indochina, North Korea and Cuba. Ruthless dictators with huge arsenals control many nations in the Middle East. Terrorism,

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ethnic fighting and guerrilla wars are ripping societies apart from Indonesia and Burma to Yugoslavia and Peru.

Here at home, we have the problems of a huge budget deficit, inadequate health care, recession, homelessness, poverty housing, racism, AIDS, alcohol and drug abuse, millions of tons of garbage we don't know what to do with, an escalating murder rate and other forms of violence, an underclass that is growing, disintegrating family life, and so much more.

The ozone layer is thinning, acid rain is killing some of our forests and people are chopping down the rest, and an escalating population around the world threatens to suffocate us all. The Census Bureau's 1991 world population report projects that the world population will increase 52% by the year 2020, to a total of eight billion people. That's up from about five and a half billion today. Every year we are adding ninety-five million people to the planet, more than the population of Mexico.

How do we solve these problems? First, by seeking that guidance from God, which I spoke about earlier and second, by intelligent, compassionate, cooperative work.

Barriers must be broken down and priorities re-evaluated to even begin to solve our problems. In this affluent nation, we have over 350,000 churches and most of them throw crumbs at the nation's problems and even less at the world's problems, while lavishing expenditures on themselves. If you doubt what I'm saying, examine almost any church budget and you will see what the priorities are. These walls that separate our churches from the poor and oppressed must be demolished.

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The Kingdom of God is bigger than the church. It embraces and encompasses the entire world. And, as we are told in Romans, that Kingdom is about righteousness, peace and joy.

Barriers between denominations must be broken down. We help in that process in Habitat for Humanity. A foundational philosophy of Habitat is what we call "the theology of the hammer". That simply means that people of faith who may disagree on baptism, communion, how the preacher ought to dress, what night to have prayer meeting, or whatever, can agree on a hammer, the tool of Jesus, and use it as an instrument with which to manifest God's love by building and renovating houses for needy families. Thousands of Christians of virtually all Protestant denominations, Catholics, Synagogues and people of other faiths, are regularly building and renovating houses all around the world. This, to me, is a wonderful demonstration of how people can work harmoniously together.

Barriers between people in our country must be dismantled. And, barriers between government and the people should be removed. The evidence of a sense of estrangement of people from our government is being seen currently in the incredibly low numbers of folks who are going to the polls to vote.

Barriers between nations need to be broken. What's happened in Eastern Europe and especially with the Berlin Wall should be seen as a parable for the world. And, the growing cooperation in Europe should encourage us all.

You graduates are young and full of energy and idealism. Use that God given life and energy to break down barriers which need to go, to pursue peace and to build up the world God has given you. Now is the time to act. Life goes by ever so quickly.

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Longfellow concludes his powerful poem with these relevant thoughts, so very pertinent to my message to you as you embark on your respective careers.

"Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,-act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait."

May God bless you and guide you in your various pursuits in the years ahead. And, may all of them be in the direction of things which make for peace and the building up of one another.