

PURSuing THE THINGS WHICH MAKE FOR PEACE

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 a great honor and a distinct privilege to be able to deliver this Baccalaureate sermon to you. I am grateful to Dr. Horner and to the entire 1992 North Park Commencement Committee for the invitation to be a part of the ninety-ninth commencement weekend and the culmination of your year-long Centennial observance.

I have been to North Park College many times and have interacted with numerous North Park people over the years, but, especially, I have worked closely with Jim Lundeen, founding director of your pioneering Urban Outreach program and now full-time director of the Uptown affiliate of Habitat for Humanity. And I can tell you that I have a deep love and appreciation for my dear brother in Christ, Jim Lundeen. He has done an amazing job of working with the students at North Park--many of you in this graduating class--to build Habitat houses here in Uptown, Albany Park, Westside, Pilsen-Little Village and other neighborhoods throughout the City of Chicago.

Because of my work with Jim, and others at North Park, I feel a real kinship with you. And, an enormous sense of appreciation for what you've done and for what you stand for.

You were truly instrumental in transforming the ministry of Habitat for Humanity from the theoretical to the practical in Chicago, beginning in the Westside neighborhood in 1984. Then, North Park students brought Habitat to Uptown and Albany Park. In all, North Park students have built or renovated twenty Habitat houses for needy families.

Also, through you students, and because of your good example, numerous other Habitat affiliates have been formed in a number of other locations in several different states.

Without a doubt, North Park College has one of the most dynamic and effective Campus Chapters of Habitat for Humanity in the nation. You were one of the first colleges in the country to form an official Chapter of Habitat and you have continued to grow stronger year by year. Today, there are over three hundred Habitat Chapters and associated groups throughout the United States and now in a couple of other countries. These Campus groups are in addition to the now over eight hundred affiliated and sponsored Habitat projects in thirty-seven nations around the world.

Also, North Park provides office space in Sohlberg Hall for Uptown Habitat and helped them get vehicles for the construction work.

For all of this, and more, I express heartfelt thanks to Dr. Horner and his entire administration, to the Board of Directors of the college, and to you students. You are simply terrific!

Beyond the Habitat connection here in Chicago, I feel a sense of kinship with you through our work in Gemena, Zaire. As you know, the Evangelical Covenant Church has extensive missionary work in the northwestern area of that Central African nation. And, Habitat enjoys a good working relationship there both with the expatriates and national leadership of the church as we build houses for needy families in that part of the world.

In addition to our many Habitat connections, I feel at one with you at North Park College for many other reasons. First of all, you believe and I affirm that "an informing objective of Christian liberal arts education is a preparedness to serve God in the world." You believe, and are committed to, relating faith in Jesus Christ to the aims of higher education. And, your doors have long been open to students who recognize that education always implies values.

Your school motto really resonates in my heart, "In thy light shall we see light." And, words set in a small stone in the foundation of the northwest corner of Old Main, "For God and Humanity". With a purpose like that, it is no wonder that North Park folks quickly signed on with a Christian group called Habitat for Humanity!

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.

Tonight, I want to talk about pursuing the things which make for peace.

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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"!

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.

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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, an accident, 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.

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 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.

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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."

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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."

My spiritual mentor, the late Dr. Clarence Jordan, the man who with his wife Florence and Martin and Mabel England founded Koinonia Farm, a Christian community in South Georgia where Habitat for Humanity has its tap root, 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 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 North Park

Page | 6 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, 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, 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, we have racism. The events of recent weeks in Los Angeles and several other cities were catapulted into our consciousness because of racism. There is no other way to characterize the Rodney King verdict than racist. Then, other lawless and racist actions were triggered. A spiral of violence was set off that left scores of people dead or grievously injured, hundreds of millions of dollars worth of property destroyed and our whole society reeling from the aftermath.

Environmentally, 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. In a word, by putting your motto into dynamic practice by living and working for God and humanity! But, how, in practical way, do you do that?

Barriers must be broken down and priorities re-evaluated. 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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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, Jews 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 removed. 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 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.

And, not only do barriers need to be demolished. Bridges of love, understanding and faith must be built. Who is better equipped to do this kind of work than graduates of a Christian College with a century of tradition of preparing young men and women like yourselves to not only "see the light", but to "be the light" in the world? Never has your influence and involvement been more needed than now. I pray that you will be equal to the challenges that lie ahead.

Well, graduates, this is what I wanted to share with you on this very important weekend in your lives. I hope these thoughts have been helpful to you in some measure. I do wish you the very best of success, happiness and fulfillment in the years ahead.

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"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. And, may all of them be in the direction of things which make for peace and the building up of the world God has given us to live in and of one another.