

Agnes Scott College /Baccalaureate
Atlanta, Georgia
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A Woman of Worth

Let us pray,

"God, of love and light, we pray today for illumination. We pray that your light would be in our hearts and in our minds and especially in the hearts and minds of these young women who have gone down a long road of education and have come here today at a high point, at a milestone in their lives. We know all about the efforts that it has taken and the sacrifice on their part and on the part of their parents and friends. But today is a special day and we thank you for it. As we go into this service and continue our time together, reading responsively, having prayers, singing together and now hearing a message, we pray that we will be enlightened. And that because we have come to this baccalaureate service, that we will be better prepared for the weeks and months ahead. We pray for continual guidance by your Holy Spirit and may all that we do here in the remainder of this service and in the days to come, be pleasing in your sight. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

The scripture reading for today is quite short but it is, in my opinion, full of power and so very appropriate for this occasion. It is the 11th verse of the 3rd chapter of the book of Ruth. Boaz, who eventually married Ruth, is speaking and he is addressing these comments to Ruth. "And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence."

It is impossible for me to convey to you the depths of my feeling about Agnes Scott College. I have such an enormous respect and love and appreciation for Dr. Ruth Smith. And I have such a love, and have come to have such a love, for this wonderful place. I have known about Agnes Scott College for many years but I spent some time on the campus for the first time in 1988, in the summer of that year when we were having the annual Jimmy Carter Habitat for Humanity blitz build here in the city. And Dr. Smith and other officials of the college very graciously gave permission for the workers to stay

here at the college because it was the summer time and there were some available rooms. We stayed here and we would go out from here every day to build 20 houses in 5 days on the east side of Atlanta. Then, some period of time went by and our youngest daughter, Georgia, enrolled in a college in Indiana and it went along all right for a while, but then she began to tell her mom and me that she didn't like it and she wanted to go somewhere else. She had been here to Agnes Scott, in fact, she was on campus during that blitz build time. I suggested, perhaps, Agnes Scott College. And she said, "What? A girl's school?" Well, she came here and found out it was a women's institution. She has had a marvelous time and through Georgia we have gotten to know many of the faculty and administration and a great number of the students. Our appreciation and love for Agnes Scott has grown. And for me to be invited to give the baccalaureate sermon is a high honor and an incredible privilege. So you are having today, one stand before you who is in awe of this institution. And I say to you young women who are graduating today, you are privileged people and you have had an opportunity to attend one of the really great institutions of this country. I really mean that. And I commend all of you, especially the faculty and the administration for the outstanding job that you have done to make Agnes Scott what it is.

This scripture that I have read to you today, I have only used one other time. As Dr. Smith said in her introduction of me, I have had the privilege of speaking all around the world to many different audiences. I have spoken at many colleges and universities, to many churches and on many other occasions. But only one other time in my entire life have I used this scripture of the 11th verse of the 3rd chapter of Ruth. And that was when I preached one of the two funerals I have preached in my life. I'm not a pastor. I'm a lawyer by profession. And lawyers don't get invited to preach many funerals. And presidents of non-profit organizations don't get invited to preach many funerals either. But I used that scripture when I preached the funeral for a magnificent woman named "Miss" Gussie Jackson.

"Miss" Gussie Jackson died almost exactly 12 years ago. She was a simple woman. She never had an opportunity to go to college. She never even had an opportunity to go to high school. I don't know exactly how many years of education she had but it was very few. But this woman who made her home in Plains, Georgia was an extraordinary woman. One of the things that she did in her life was to be a midwife. And in her

lifetime, she delivered literally hundreds of babies. And one of those babies was Georgia Fuller, who is graduating today. She was delivered by "Miss" Gussie Jackson at our house at Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia. And you can imagine the emotion in my heart to be able to use this same scripture today, when our beloved daughter is graduating. I used that same scripture when I preached the funeral of the woman who brought her into the world.

"Miss" Gussie Jackson and her family associated themselves with Koinonia farm. Koinonia Farm was mentioned in the introduction. That's a Christian community near Americus, Georgia that was founded 52 years ago by one of the most remarkable men in this country, Dr. Clarence Jordan, who died several years ago. He with his wife Florence founded an integrated Christian community in 1942 in southwest Georgia. And that took an awful lot of courage. And it took courage for White and Black to come together and live together and work together at this small Christian community near Americus, Georgia. And a son of "Miss" Gussie Jackson joined this community and because of that she became and her whole family became the object of ridicule and they were harassed. And people came and tried to get her to take her family out of this community. They didn't like the fact that it was integrated and they began to make threats and she refused. Her son continued to live there. And a group of vigilantes came to her house one evening and poured gasoline on the side of the house and set it on fire and tried to burn her house down. And I have heard her tell this story many times. She came out, saw the whole side of her house on fire and she said, "Lord, this is the only house I got. I don't have any money to build another one." She said she ran inside and got down on her hands and knees and said, "Lord, put that fire out." Then she went back outside and the fire was out. And the house did not burn. It was an amazing thing.

But Linda and I knew her for many years because she sat at a table at Koinonia in the fall and she put pecans in dates. She was the date stuffer. And she sat there hour after hour stuffing pecans in dates so that folks all over the country could have a good treat around Christmas time. As I said, she was a simple woman. But she was a woman of excellence. She was a woman of worth. And I used that scripture at her funeral. She was buried near Cedar Springs Baptist Church just out from Plains and so many people were at her funeral they couldn't get in the church. And they listened through the windows and

they stood in the back. The place was totally packed with all of the people who loved her because she had lived her life in such a way that people loved and respected her. And she took what she had and she used it to the very best of her ability. I've heard her and I've heard others say what an outstanding midwife she was and what an excellent record she had as a midwife. She had learned that trade well and did it well over the years.

Well Ruth, the person in this scripture that I read to you, was a person like that. A rather simple and humble woman who had come from another country, from Moab, and she had come with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and she was a gleaner in the fields. She went behind the harvesters to pick up what was spilled and what was left over. And she came to the attention of the man who owned the field, Boaz, and they ended up getting married. And their first son was Orbed who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of King David and, of course it was in his lineage that Joseph was eventually born and, in an earthly sense, it was into that family that Jesus of Nazareth was born.

So, these two people that I put a spotlight on today, Ruth and "Miss" Gussie Jackson, were two simple persons living in very different ages. But both alike in the sense of being women of worth or women of excellence.

You women who are graduating today are like neither of these women in the sense of the advantages that you have had in your lives. You are not simple, humble people. You are people who have had the advantage of families who have supported you. You are people who have the advantages of being able to come to an outstanding institution like Agnes Scott College. You have had the advantage of having good teachers. Some of you getting your Bachelors degree tomorrow, and others getting your Masters degree. You are surrounded by contacts. You know a wealth of friends who are influential or who will be influential in the years to come. And you yourselves will have influence to one extent or another. You are young women who have great opportunities ahead of you and my challenge for you today is to take the fullest advantage of your opportunities and as you do so, be inspired by the example of Ruth. And be inspired by the example of "Miss" Gussie Jackson. I challenge you to be like "Miss" Gussie Jackson and to be like Ruth. Live your life in such a way that people will say of you, as Boaz said of Ruth, "There is a woman of excellence so known by all of the people in the town."

Dr. Smith mentioned in her introduction that I had recently written a new book entitled the *Theology of the Hammer*. In that book, there is a chapter entitled "A well-built theology." And right at the beginning of that chapter, I quote some scriptures about how the God that we seek to serve is a God of excellence or a God of perfection. In Deuteronomy, the 32nd chapter, and 4th verse for example we read, "God is the rock. His works are perfect." And in II Samuel 22:31 we read, "As for God, his way is perfect." And in II Samuel 22:33, "It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect." And then, as is recorded in Matthew 5:48, Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. So we have the example from both the Old Testament and the New Testament and throughout the scriptures, we have the admonition that we should constantly strive in our lives for perfection or for excellence. Jesus himself in his ministry always did a good job. When he healed someone, he never said, "I'm on a tight schedule today, I can take care of the right leg but just keep draggin' the left one." When somebody was to be healed from blindness, he never said, "I'll take care of that right eye, but you'll just have to do the best you can with only one eye because I'm busy right now." And when he was dealing with a crowd of hungry folks, he didn't say, "I'll take care of 50% of them or 75% or even 99%." He fed the whole crowd and even did such a good job, a whole lot was left over. This is doing a job right.

When I was raised up in a rural area of east Alabama, my father used to say, "Anything worth doing at all is worth doing right." And so, I would say that to you graduates today. Anything worth doing at all is worth doing right. And I challenge you to do it so right that you will be known as a person of excellence.

In Habitat for Humanity, we emphasize excellence in our building. We build modest houses but we build good and solid houses. I imagine a lot of you saw the publicity about the houses built by Habitat for Humanity in the Miami area when Hurricane Andrew blew through in August of 1992 and all the other houses blew down but Habitat houses stood firm. I was down there shortly after the hurricane and I tell you the Habitat houses looked like they had been built after the hurricane. And people began to ask me, "How can you explain that your houses didn't blow away?" All these other houses, many of them, two, three, five, ten times more expensive houses just blew right down. And these little,

modest, simple Habitat for Humanity houses, not a single one of them was damaged sufficiently for the family to have to move out. Well, in our work with Habitat for Humanity, we say we're an ecumenical Christian organization and we don't have any doctrine except one doctrinal point and that is if you don't have a Habitat bumper sticker on your car, you're living in sin. (laughter) And I try to live such a Habitat righteous life that I even put a bumper sticker on my briefcase. So, right after the hurricane, as I was walking around in airports all over the place with my Habitat bumpers sticker there for everybody in the world to see, total strangers would stop me and they would say, "Oh, I see you work for Habitat for Humanity. God bless you, I heard your houses didn't blow away in Miami." And they would shake my hand and they would pat me on the back and they were just amazed. And people started asking me, "But how can you explain that?"

I was interviewed by a newspaper reporter in Phoenix, Arizona not too long after the hurricane and this news reporter asked me that question, "How can you explain that your houses didn't blow away?" And I responded by telling him that it was simple. There were three reasons. "Number one," I said, "We always build our houses on rocks."

He wrote down , "rocks". And then he looked up at me with this funny look on his face and he said, " But where do you get those rocks? I thought there was mostly sand in south Florida."

I said, "We get 'em out of the Bible." I said, "Don't you know the Bible? The Bible says if you build your house on a rock, the storms can come and the winds can blow and the rains can come down and the house will stand firm, but if you build your house on sand, it will blow away."

He said, "What's reason number two?"

I said, "Reason number two is that we always put love in the mortar joints. We don't just put cement in there, we put love in there." and I said, "Man, when the winds come along, that love really holds 'em tight."

He wrote that down. He said, "What's reason number three?"

I said, "Reason number three is that Habitat houses are built mostly by volunteers. Many of them college students and most of 'em don't really know what they are doing. And since they don't really know what they are doing. If the rules call for two nails, they put in ten. And so when a hurricane comes along, it doesn't have a chance." Well, he wrote extensively about that one.

But I want you to think about that rather humorous explanation about why Habitat houses stood firm. Because I want to say to you graduates, consider that little story as somewhat of a parable for your life. Build your lives on a foundation of faith. This day and age, it is sort of cool, it is sort of chic not to really believe very strongly in anything. It is the perpetual open mind syndrome. And that open mind syndrome is a decision in itself. You've decided to base your life on wishy-washy. But I submit to you that you need to have a firm faith on which to build your life, on a rock. And secondly, you need to build your life around and upon and under the banner of love.

Linda and I have a good friend, who we have know for several years, and she says, and she is quite elderly now, she says, "In my lifetime I have loved and I have been loved and everything else is just background music." Well, I'm not sure I would go that far, but I tell you, love is real important. Some of you are already married, most of you will eventually be married. Some of you have children and many of the others of you will have children. Loving those who are very, very close to you is so important. Sometimes we get caught up in the real big things of life and you are busy saving the world and you don't have time to express love to those who are closest to you. So having a life that is characterized by love, starting with those who are closest to you, is so very important. It's a big part of the formula of living a life of excellence.

Finally, do things right. There is no substitute for hard work. There is no substitute for burning the midnight oil. And just because you've graduated now doesn't mean that your life of learning is over. In many ways, it is just beginning. I would say, make the effort, take the time to do whatever you're doing, right. It pays rich dividends and wonderful rewards to know that you have done your very best at whatever you set out to do.

And of course, along the way, I think a big part of a life of worth or being a woman of excellence is having some fun. Nobody likes an old snoot or a grouch. Learn how to kick up your heels and have a big time. It will make you more productive in the hours that you do burn the midnight oil and work hard to do a good job. So I hope these thoughts and these ideas will be helpful to you in the days and weeks and months to come. In closing, let me say again, to all of you, never forget how fortunate you are to be graduating from such a wonderful institution. God bless you in the years ahead.