

A New Commencement
April 29, 2018
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn
Texts: Revelation 21:1-6a

There must be something about turning 100 years old that is good for a body. As you know, our friend and child of this congregation Sarah Belk Gambrell celebrated her centennial a couple of weeks ago. That makes her slightly younger than our historic church.

At her party, she wore a lovely pastel pink suit that complemented her bright blue eyes. She veritably glowed, as if the years had all regathered around her to pay respect, reflecting softly off her white hair. After her instrumental support in so many good and important causes and a pretty savvy career as a business woman, the who's who of our city came by to wish her well, one by one. Queen Elizabeth has nothing on our Sarah.

Her guests received a parting gift, a copy of a commencement speech by a Harvard University business professor named Clayton Christenson. Imagine that! It takes quite a spirit to see one's 100th birthday party as a commencement, a beginning. That tells us a lot about the woman who grew up over there on about the sixth pew back under the watchful eye of her stern but visionary father.

It is commencement season, after all. At thousands of schools of every level, graduates will don cap and gown, cross the stages of stadiums and arenas, and begin a new phase of life just beginning.

This morning, I want to engage us all in that same commencement ceremony frame of mind – no not the one that is looking forward to the big party later. I mean the one of taking a good look at our shared journey in God's service, as the body of Christ, here at the corner of Park and Fifth.

For baby Sadie, it is a new beginning in the arms of the body of Christ.

For our Associate Nominating Committee, today is a happy ending, after hundreds of hours of work. For the ministries of this church, it is a new beginning. When our new teammate arrives, it will be the first time we have had two people in full-time pastoral roles in more than a half-century. A new commencement indeed! Thanks be to God.

As Presbyterians, we search for our pastors using conventional means – resumes, interviews, checking references and so on. However, the invisible but certain hand in any search is the Holy Spirit. As diverse as our search committee is – we have chuckled at how it doesn't even include a straight white male – they are utterly and absolutely unanimous in today's recommendation. They are clear in their hearts that God has guided them to this day and the person they will introduce a little later on.

But first, on this day of new commencement, we have the chance to look afresh at ourselves and our ministries.

The commencement speech the Gambrell family shared was by a Harvard Business professor. But it wasn't about going to Wall Street or Silicon Valley or how to make your first million. It was about how to live life well and meaningfully. The professor made three points that serve us well on this, yet another commencement day for us.

His first point focused on creating a healthy organizational culture. Harvard Business School types end up leading people and organizations and culture can make or break their success. Culture is about the tone that is set, every day. It's about not just the what but the how. Not just reaching goals but in caring for and building up people along the way. I learned a lot about culture from my former boss Hugh McColl. His teammates would do almost anything for him – because they knew he truly cared for them and he wanted to use the company's power for good.

What is our culture here at Caldwell? What brings us together to seek common goals in Christ's name? What differentiates this place of worship from the 750 others in our city? What values do we share – or at least try to share – across our intersectional diversity? In what specific ways do we return God's love by loving each other and others in our community?

What words come to mind? How about social justice? That's probably a top three, right? How about a radical welcome and an unwavering commitment to diversity? How about a deep desire to learn from others who are different? How about the flexibility it takes to work across all of our differences? How about a readiness to embrace the woundedness around us – our own wounds and the wounds of others, even those inflicted by the church? How about a promise among those of us who have enough to share with others who don't, that they may know lives of dignity, too?

What else? How about a comfort with experimentation and taking risk, because God sure took a risk on us? How about an abiding sense of abundance of God's blessing and constant guiding hand? How about a sense of gratitude for what we have been given here and what we have come to mean to each other – even when we strongly disagree?

How about love?

What would you add? Let me know later. I would like to hear.

The second point the good professor makes is one he puts in business terms – but there is an underlying life lesson, even for us as a church. Business leaders, he says, look too much at what is called the marginal cost. They ask, what is the value of spending one more dollar in product development – or not? What is the value of keeping one more employee – or not?

The risk of this way of thinking, he says, is that this tendency tempts decision makers to look only at the short term ... which means taking one's eye off those guiding principles and ideas that have delivered them through the years.

He tells the story of how he played basketball for his college but was also a man of faith who had promised himself and God that he would save Sundays for the Lord. One year, his team made it to a championship – and the deciding game was on a Sunday.

His coach and his team pushed hard for him to play. He faced a hard decision – would he go back on his promise to himself and God, just this once? Would he make that marginal decision – to compromise his values? In the end, he stuck to his promise to God and didn't play.

For us at Caldwell, his question about whether he would compromise can help us focus on what is most important here. What promises did we make to ourselves 11 years ago when God gave this church a second chance? Have we ever gone back on those principles?. Have we said to ourselves, we will forget about that “just this once?”

The gospel is clear: What is the greatest commandment, they asked Jesus” To love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength and mind.

Beyond that the clearest expression of who as Caldwell say we wanted to be is on the back of your worship bulletin. Our mission statement was aspirational then and it still is. It's also a promise we made to ourselves, just like the professor did about keeping his Sundays for God.

The big ideas expressed in that mission statement are more than just that, however. We have the chance every day to use them as a guide for every decision we make. How will we treat each other? How do we treat others in greater need? How we will use our resources, including our church budget? How will we use our campus?

This month, we face two important chances to act on those aspirations. One looks back and one looks ahead. We have been looking back at this church's deep connections to slavery. On May 16 we will gather to think hard about how we can acknowledge that sin and use our learning to bear witness to correcting it.

As for the future, next Sunday we will look at three concepts for a master plan for our campus. Our architects listened in depth to your input. Our ultimate decisions later this summer will express how we might enhance our campus for its use for our city, for our neighbors in desperate need of affordable housing and for ourselves.

Each day in ministry here, God calls us to be true to Her calling of us and of this place as a missional church, one that is outward facing, generous with what we have and generative with our possibilities to heal a divided and hurting city. God watches when

we compromise the value that we set forth in our mission statement. God hears it when we say we will make a different kind of decision “just this once.”

Finally, the professor asks the graduates in the commencement address Sarah shared with us, “What yardstick will we use to measure our success?” The obvious choice for the Harvard Business School graduates he addressed is whether they would use more than money to measure their lives.

What about for us? What is our yardstick? Is it growth in members? Certainly growth has its plusses – it deepens our community, brings new friends, new ideas, new possibilities and new resources. We have experienced steady growth in the last decade and we are translating that into ministry.

But church growth as measured by numbers of members has been a deceptive flirt for too many churches. Growth without integrity, growth without a clear and defining mission, growth that dilutes the culture we have worked so hard to build here isn’t what we should strive for.

What is, then? What is our yardstick for success in God’s eyes? We have been given plenty to do in the next few years. How will we know if it is what Jesus would do? Is it in how many of us go to Raleigh on a Monday in the next few weeks and protest the one sided abuse of power in our General Assembly to the detriment of the most vulnerable? Is it in even incremental changes we can help make happen here in Charlotte so that one day we are no longer a tale of two cities, one for all the haves and one for all the have-nots? Is it in how we listen even more deeply to each other and find solidarity with each other in Christ’s service, whether we are black or white, rich or poor or middle class, gay or straight or trans?

Is it in the depth to which we know God’s word? Is it in how many children we are baptizing, as we did today? Is it entirely something else?

Give that some thought and let me know. Better yet, talk it up amongst yourselves.

In closing, friends, what we do know is that we are at best passengers on God’s bus. And that bus is never at a standstill. The scriptures we heard a few moments ago attest to a God who is never through with us, a God who calls us to keep pushing to advance God’s vision of peace and justice here on earth, here in Charlotte.

God promised the children of Israel through the prophet Isaiah that God will do a new thing – do we not see it?

In Revelations, God promises a new heaven and a new earth – not as some unreachable vision but as a model toward which we must strive faithfully and untiringly. These are familiar passages – and that is as it should be. We should keep them close at hand. They offer both an assurance and an invitation. They make it unmistakably clear that the chaos we see around us, the corrupt leadership, the war and the violence,

discrimination and prejudice and oppression in systems and structures are not what God wants but the opposite.

So let us begin again. Let us on this joyous day commence and be about God's business. Amen.