

Common Good in Uncommon Times
Queens University Baccalaureate
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Texts: Jeremiah 29, Acts 1

What an honor and privilege it is to share this time with you graduates, your families and all the professors, advisors, administrators, directors, coaches, housekeepers and cafeteria crew who helped get you through.

Queens has meant many things to me and my family. I share ministry with your sage chaplain, Dr. Diane Mowrey. My sister attended Queens in the 1970s. About the same time, my stepmother helped launch one of your first adult education programs. Dr. Billy Wireman contributed great wisdom to Hugh McColl's speeches. Then Dr. Wireman welcomed with open arms Union Presbyterian Seminary, which eventually allowed me to do the work I love. At Union Seminary, I was honored to be the Wireman Scholar.

But, oh Dr. Davies, look at what you have done with the place! Congratulations to you and your entire team on developing Queens into the center of service and thought leadership our city needs. I'm not quite sure how you can do more, but I know you are hardly finished.

One of the most enduring truths I learned in seminary is actually a humorous one. (Yes, we Presbyterians *can* laugh. It's true. We are evolving!) The truth is this: If you want to make God laugh, tell God all about *your* plans. Not only is that good Reformed theology, reminding us of the sovereignty of God, it is also bedrock wisdom. Over the years, I've learned that first hand, as you graduates will, if you haven't already.

Speaking of jokes, did you hear the one about the time a journalist, a speechwriter and a preacher walked into a bar. Actually, that's not a joke. It was last night when I had a beer ... alone. You see, you never know how one career can lead to another.

But the good news is this – you graduates are prepared. I'm confident Queens has done that. What I do want to offer is a simple and straightforward charge to each of you graduates: Seek the common good.

The idea of the common good has been hijacked and marginalized in recent years by those who practice the new religion of radical individualism as well as those on both the far right and the far left with unbending political agendas and ideologies. But long before the Tea Party or the Occupy Movement, the common sense cause that is the common

good was spoken out of the heart of our Lord to God's people and into virtually every major world religion.

We hear it in the words of the prophet Jeremiah to the children of Israel in exile in Babylon. They had been removed from all that was familiar and comforting. Through Jeremiah, God makes it clear they won't be coming back home right away. Build houses and plant gardens there, Jeremiah says. Take wives and husbands. Have children and multiply. In other words, the Lord says to Israel, make yourselves at home there for now.

“BUT”

“BUT ...” the Lord goes on to say. Watch out, now, for those seemingly innocent little prepositions the Lord sneaks in.

“BUT ... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you and pray to the Lord on its behalf for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Through Jeremiah, God gives clear instruction to Israel. Seek happiness and prosperity and that of your families ... BUT ... BUT ... BUT also seek the common good, even the good of the foreign people whose land I am sending you to occupy. Even those people with whom you think you have nothing in common. Even those people whom you may *think* you don't need for your own happiness. Even those people next door or down the block or across town that you might just as soon forget about.

Pray for those people and seek their good as well as yours, the Lord says through Jeremiah. Do that, learn that for a generation or two, make that a way of life and then see the amazing plans I have for you, God says. Just wait to see the future and the hope I have in store for you.

God says, “Seek the welfare of the city and in it you will find your welfare.”

Don't do that and Well, the Almighty doesn't have to say how that might turn out for the children of Israel.

Jeremiah still speaks to us, to you graduates and to the rest of us gathered on this happy occasion of your stepping out into the world. Seek the *common* good. Not by becoming an isolationist or some kind of cynical survivalist. Not by thinking you can make your own promised land in a gated community somewhere and forget about those who are not as fortunate as you.

Seek the common good, rather, by stepping out of your comfort zone on a regular basis. Seek the common good by putting others' needs above your own - by voting for school bonds even if you don't have a child in public schools, by pouring your sweat equity in with the home-owners-to-be on a Habitat House or by speaking truth to power when necessary, whether it is corporate or government power, even if it's uncomfortable, because silence otherwise is only tacit approval.

After all, that is the sum of the education you have received here, isn't it?

From the time God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, that has been our Lord's expectation – to live in peace, mutual respect and interdependence. It is the Great Commandment Jesus gave his followers, “To love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and ... and ... and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.” It is a two-part, non-negotiable deal – love God, love your neighbor as yourself.

That core claim doesn't stop at the boundaries of the Judeo-Christian ethic. It was central to the birth of this nation. And the essence of that Golden Rule is repeated in every major world religion.

But here is the twist. It's not easy.

It's not easy now and it will be even trickier by the time our generations hand the keys of this country over to you graduates.

I recently heard a consultant say that we live in a “VUCA” world. V...U...C...A. That is, a world shaped by volatility, unpredictability, complexity and ambiguity.

The nation you will inherit will be vastly more diverse and pluralistic than any previous generation has known. It will be a nation peppered by racial, ethnic and religious differences and variations. It will be a nation of cities as urban migration continues, reminding us of Jeremiah's words.

Here in Charlotte, many demographers say we already have tipped to become a minority-majority city. That is, a city where there is no racial majority of any kind or color. Many of you come from - or may go settle in - regions and cities where the same is true. It is a reality that awaits our nation as a whole by the year 2040 or so. But we in Charlotte have a head start, a chance to get it right or not.

Graduates, all of that is to say that you will live in uncommon times, times unlike any of us older folks have ever known. So while the community here at Queens has done everything they know to prepare you, any of us adults must admit we don't have first-hand experience with the kind of nation you will define and lead in 2020 or 2030 or 2040. You will have to figure some things out on your own. You will have to figure out how to seek and achieve the common good in your own uncommon times.

But two things give me deep confidence in you. Not just confidence, but hope, abiding and profound hope.

First, the same Creator that has seen us through thus far goes ahead of you and all of us, even now. Always has. The reading we heard a moment ago from the second chapter of Acts reminds us that our Lord has been there before. You heard what happened that day of Pentecost, when a vastly diverse gathering came to ancient Jerusalem. They spoke many languages. Yet they found a way to understand each other, in and through the unseen hand of God in the Holy Spirit. Yes, our Creator has been there before.

The second reason for my great hope in you graduates has to do with the particular promise and potential of your generation, promise and potential that is rooted in who you are, how you have been formed by the world around you and how you see the world you will one day lead.

According to a range of polls and studies, you have your own unique expressions. The Pew research project studying social and demographic trends notes that nearly four in ten of you have a tattoo. And that's OK, really. The research goes on to say that of that 40%, about half have two to five tattoos. If that's the case with any of you and you haven't told your parents, maybe this isn't the weekend to break that news.

Despite entering the workforce amid the headwinds of the Great Recession, you so-called Millennials don't seem too worried about money, the research shows. Your priorities reflect your values. You – the generation born after 1980 - rank the goals of being a good parent, having a successful marriage and helping others in need all ahead of things like owning a home, making a big salary or being famous.

As the first generation of young people since 9-11, you are wary but not bitter. You are the least overtly religious American generation in modern times. I for one can't blame you – given some of the failures and hypocrisies of the church in your time. I hope we in the church today – and the rising generation of church leaders - can change that. More important, I think God can change that, if we listen.

You are on course to be the most educated generation in American history. And, you get along well with others - older generations and people of all races, creeds and colors, including immigrants.

As I said, I find great hope in all of that, great hope. Now, you may hear some tell you that these qualities of openness, selflessness, generosity and appetite for change will wear down over time, as you are faced with the realities of life – working for a living, paying bills and taxes, raising children. But don't buy into that. Don't lose that resistance against skepticism and cynicism that is one of your shining strengths. My generation may have created some big challenges. But I have hope in you. I have hope in what our Creator can do through you.

For the last four – or so – years, you have been held in the embrace of an institution whose motto is “Not to be served but to serve.” You have been steeped in the values of integrity, respect, stewardship, creativity and innovation. Your school has modeled for you a broader openness to multiple traditions and values.

But I can't let this moment pass without noting that Presbyterians helped build this place So I will draw on a bit of Presbyterian polity to close. When our denomination ordains new officers, new elders to lead the church, part of their charge, the promise we ask them to make, is to lead the church with “energy, intelligence, imagination and love.”

To lead in your times, to provide for the common good in uncommon times, you will need heavy doses of all four of those things – energy, intelligence, imagination and love. Queens has taught you the first three and, I hope, along with your parents and friends, plenty of the last – which is love. Don't ever lose sight of the sheer power of that one, beginning with loving yourselves.

So I will ask the graduating class to stand And I will put the question to you:

Will you strive to lead our city, our nation and world with energy, intelligence, imagination and love? Will you?

Well then, Amen. So let it be!