

VOICES OF PROTEST, SONGS OF HOPE
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
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today is a celebration that marks your time at garrett

it is a time to end

and time to begin

it is a time to savor the moment

the accomplishment

the regret

the survival

the joy

the skills and insights learned
and left aside

and, perhaps, some sorrow that this part of
life and living will soon join the human
drama of existence as history

and one begins, again, as you will do
over and over again

if you take seriously living a full
life rather than one that marks time
with a slow beat metronome

this is a time of recognizing that you cannot stay in one place
be it emotional, physical, political, spiritual, theological

and continue to grow

and so i want to pose a question for you today that i trust you
will continue to ask yourself from time to time as you move
through your journeys in the years to come:

what will you do with the fullness and incompleteness of
what you bring to your now

as you remember that we are in a world

that we have helped make

that needs a new, or perhaps ancient vision

molded by justice and peace

rather than winning and loosing

what will each of us do with the fullness and incompleteness of
what we bring to our now

as we hold fast to the simple notion that each of us
matters, that creation itself matters

and we cannot sit idly by and wish for good things to
happen

for we must set about the business of making them happen

now, this is a tall order but it is not an impossible order

and it does not take unusual courage or insight

**what it takes is your willingness to be a voice of
protest and a song of hope**

and i think that the only way we can live into this kind of
witness

as a church

and the roles we should and must play

as people who want to or must serve the communities in
which we will find ourselves

is that we refuse to give up uncovering and working through how
we can build justice-filled responses

to meet the needs of those who may be the least of these

or folks just like many of us—blessed with resources and
abilities and a divine or passionate mandate to use them
part of the way in which we live into this witness

is to name the sin when bigoted remarks about

all colors of peoples

religions

genders and sexualities

physical and emotional abilities and more

are considered, by some, to be about free speech rather
than hatred dressed up in first amendment drag

or intended and unintended hateful jokes are excused as
mere words, nothing serious, inconsequential

as these words become like kindling for burning folk
at the stake of our attempts at humor

or nooses that we laugh at without recognizing the
awful next steps

the commitment to justice we must make

is a ripening into wholeness as a life journey

and not a current event

or spiritual two-step

or round house of academic arbitrariness

or momentary bout of holified indigestion

and we have become painfully aware that it takes more than
electing the first black male president

it takes more than having a majority in the senate and the
house

it takes more than the rallying cry of "yes we can"

the thrill is gone, ya'll,—because we are now having to answer

"how" and realize that although obama may have won in 2008 and assumed office in 2009

some folks have never accepted that he was elected to govern

some folks will never accept the fact that he is president

some folks are practicing selective amnesia about the incredible mess he inherited

some folks believe going back to an idyllic past that really was little more than a horror show for most of us, keeps this nation's place as the city on the hill safe and sound

but those folks do not count on committed voices of protest and hope telling the truth that not only does the emperor have no clothes, the emperor is, as my grandmother used to say: naked butt

we must take seriously the challenges of living into what it means to believe each person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect

because we are responsible for each other and ourselves

we may not always agree, nor should we expect to

we have to give an accounting of our actions and inactions

we may get tired and need a break, but we must always come back to the work our souls must have because we do not get out of this life alone

and we are responsible for what goes on in our names

to be sure, this can be a demanding or difficult task, but we must live into this hope

we must have dreams that are more powerful than nightmares

possibilities more radical than realities

and a hope that does more than cling to a wish

or wish on a star

or sit by the side of the road, picking and sucking its teeth

after dining on a meal of disaster and violence
 no, the hope we have before us comes from folk like

miss nora
 brother hemphill
 ms. montez
 mr. press
 miss rosie
 and mr. waddell

and what these old wise black heads taught me

and i want to share with you

is that there are no hiding places down here

in fact, to put it more bluntly, you are *not* called to be
 poster-children for the status quo

yes, there will be roadblocks of ignorance and detours of
 complacency put in your way

you may face stop signs that would tell us our commitment to
 break free of society's hatreds and fears is utopian

you may find yellow lights that tell you the work is finished
 now that we have achieved a goal or realized a dream or made
 real a vision

you may face the sharp curves of indifference, arrogance,
 ignorance, and empty headedness masquerading as justice,
 freedom, hope, and peace

you may get caught on the warning tracks of confused vision,
 muddled strategies, and sometimes not having a clue

you may get behind some slow moving vehicles on the road that
 continue to spawn hate crimes, think diversity is building a
 weak social fabric for our country, and admitting our
 culpability in all manner of isms is a social statement rather
 than our confessional cry that we have sinned against others

stay the course and refuse to give up on living into a brilliant
 vision

that offers us life over death

commitment over complacency

and the strength, weakness, wisdom, and foolishness to
stare at the prejudices and racisms we have stuffed way
down in us

and begin to look inward and outward and work with
each other

while being held in God's spanless hands

and step into the lives of the least of
these who are found in the many-colored
spectrum of our humanity

yes, it's up to us to move beyond a ritualized, sterilized,
codified cul-de-sac society and church that is on a death march
to annihilation

to one that respects others and the rest of creation and
puts that respect into action from the laws we make, the
public policies we develop, the education we provide, the
health care that we make accessible, and more

stop listening to or believing that old threadbare lie that
the mainline churches are dying

they are not dead, they are in the midst of being
transformed which means they/we will not look like the
church of yesteryear—nor should we

God is doing a new thing in and through you

embrace this and help the church move into a
ministry that is alive with change rather than
sitting with the naysayers on mourners bench

singing dirge after dirge to a past that is
no more

do more with your scholarship than add to the intellectual
hubris of the academy

we need engaged scholars and teachers who are not
afraid to dare to walk across the rimbones of

nothingness to place your work and teaching a world
that needs us to make it plain, make it relevant

and to lift our vision up and out rather than
contenting ourselves with the studious contemplation
of the minutia of our scholarly navels

that has little or nothing to say to the larger
worlds we live in that need fresh ideas blended
with old insights

i beg you to be committed to scholarship that is
rigorous, accessible, and can be used as tools
for insight, knowledge, and wisdom to build a
more just world within worlds

this society, this church, this academy is made up with peoples
of all racial ethnic groups

both genders and intersex

varied lifestyles and abilities

different political and theological agenda

from all levels of the class structure

documented and undocumented

all ages

and on and on into richness of our living

this society, this church, this academy, this world that you and
i must continue building, is built by thick commitment and wise
optimism and demands the best of who we can be

it refuses to accept maudlin loathing as divine mandates

when folk are hungry, thirsty, outcast, naked, sick

when we turn remembering christmas and easter into one
day a year feel good time paid holiday celebrations of
inept kumbayas and sashaying allelulias

when we believe that one election has solved all of
our issues

no, no, no my brothers and sisters, as James Baldwin reminds us: "you drag your past around with you everywhere, or it drags you."

we are the ones with the issues and we are the ones who must work to solve them

you see, i'm talking about stretching into a better future and then building it

walk around in it

sit down and play

with the holy sand

God has given each one of you

be a tireless, relentless, and sometime annoying if not outright bodacious voice of protest who sings deep and lasting songs of hope

this is what gets God up doing a standing ovation in creation

you and i living our lives out of a rich hope that is rimmed with prophetic caring

this is what gets God up doing the electric slide or jive or break-dance or just plain shimmying in the spirit

is when we refuse to accept indifference as passion

lazy platitudes as vibrant faith

moaning skepticism as committed witness

trifling clichés as vibrant spirituality

arrogant disdain as a world-filling love

refusing these things and more is what gets a divine
mmmmm...ummph...ummph...ummph

we must sing songs of hope that protest the indignities and injustices of this world

you, dear graduates, must join with those who sing these songs
that enable us to press onward when we feel like giving up
to draw strength from the future to live in a discouraging
present

our full but still incomplete now is with real people and a
tangible creation

not media-driven images of black folk, brown folk, white
folk and all color of folk that trick all of us into
believing and/or living into grotesque stereotypes of a fun
house mirror of lies about one another

not the death-dealing images of success that trick us into
thinking our accomplishments are ours alone

not the mind-numbing bromides of leadership that include
fear tactics, terrorist acts, bullying, lying, avoiding,
fronting, and simply not giving a flip about anything but
the bottom line pr, piling up legacies, building a bigger
church, building more than one campus of our church, adding
more worship services, ever-expanding parking lots, and
church bus after church bus after church bus

when the folks we seek to minister to and with remain
soul-sick, root-less, homeless, and illiterate about
the riches found in the bible and amazing histories
that form our traditions, the challenge and comfort
found in God as creator, sustainer, and redeemer, and
the holy promise of the empty tomb

if they believe that mission is about drive by
discipleship instead of being pilgrims on the journey

ultimately, the simplest, yet the most difficult answer to the
challenge of "what will you do with the fullness and
incompleteness of what you bring to your now" is: live your life
and faith with a deep love and respect for others, the rest of
creation, and yourself

take your place among the righteous and sing the songs of hope
God has placed in your heart and soul

songs that lift the spirit

songs that demand a commitment

songs that offer hope

songs that are wrapped with love

we must let folks know what it is like to sing songs of hope
without hesitation or faltering

we may sing them in fear at times

we may sing them off key sometimes

but we sing them

sing--even when the times of life are failing

sing--in the midst of joy and laughter

sing--when you feel like running

sing--even when you not sure you if you can keep standing

sing--when the candle has almost gone out

sing--when you're wrapped up, tied up, and tangled up

sing--using your heart and soul

sing--using your mind and your intellect

sing--using your witness, your hope, your love, your faith

sing--holding on to the watch light

sing--making a joyful noise unto the Lord

sing--telling folks about that sweet inspiration

sing--no matter how young you are

sing--no matter how old you are

sing--even when someone has taken the sheet music

sing--when folks tell you, you have no gift for singing

sing--because you've got a song inside you and you have to let
it go

God bless you all--families, friends, and graduates

and sing boldly!