

Change Us with Your Living Word

5/22/05

I thank the stranger who seemed totally amazed that our youngest daughter could be graduating college. “You mean High School?” she asked. “No, college.” “How old are your others?” “Our oldest is almost 30!” “NO” she seemed incredulous.

I love people like that. They make you feel so good...so young. Anyway, last Sunday we attended our daughter Lesley’s graduation from Lasell College in Newton MA. On Saturday night, she had received the book award for Human Services. It meant she was happy and that her parents got free dinners at the banquet following. (Which by the way we chose Lobster! Yes we did!)

The Speakers on Saturday night and Sunday were fine. Nothing startling or emotionally riveting, but they were fine. Graduation speeches are tough. Almost without exception, they now begin with an apology for intruding at such an occasion and a promise to be brief.

As a parent, it probably doesn’t matter too much. Behind the happiness you feel - that your last child is graduating - is the real joy of knowing that tuition statements will no longer be forthcoming. But yes, there is the sadness and fear that, at least in our case, a child is heading off into the world to make a go of it. While one speaker said that she wished for the graduates a certain amount of adversity so that they would experience failure and learn resiliency, most speakers are astute enough not to dwell on the dark shadows that lie ahead. They know, probably because they are themselves parents, what such talk does to parents in the audience.

I didn’t need much help in pushing me over the edge anyway! I had just been reading The Christian Century magazine and an article discussing the

ongoing debate about judicial appointments. How it has been turned into an argument about faith. Conservative James Dobson accuses certain members of the Supreme Court of being “arrogant and imperious and determined to redesign the culture” and implies that those who oppose certain judicial nominees are showing “judicial tyranny to people of faith.” Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners Magazine (himself a conservative in many ways) shot back by saying, those words may be the “declaration of a religious war.” As if we don’t have enough religious conflicts already!

I think that perhaps the most astute comment about all this came from California Supreme Court Justice Janice Rogers Brown, a recently approved nominee, who said, “ these are perilous times for people of faith.” Indeed!

Well, when your youngest daughter is graduating college and heading off to Worcester Mass, without a job I might add, you are disinclined to think about a world that is filled with peril. However, you can’t help yourself. So, while it didn’t rain and Lesley was happy and her other two sisters were both able to be there (so we were together as a family), ringing in my mind is the reality that these are perilous times. Troubled times, when even people of presumed and professed Christian faith argue against each other...bitterly...determined to win at all costs...threatening and by name calling. Even Bill Frist, Senate Majority Leader, (a church going Presbyterian) seemed surprised at the nastiness. “We must be clear that the balance of power requires respect – not retaliation. I won’t go along with that.”

All of which, I think, makes Paul’s second letter to the people of Corinth extremely contemporary and relevant. This Epistle was written in AD 55, roughly 20 years or so after Jesus’ death. You would think that Christ’s memory is fresh in the hearts and minds of the early church. Yet, Paul is clearly chastising the followers of “the way.” They apparently doubted Paul’s integrity and character.

Some have taken to other religious leaders and tried to sway others. Paul writes in Chapter 4, "...but we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word." He says that the minds of unbelievers have been blinded, knowing (all the while) that it is the vision of the disloyal churchgoer that has been blinded to the truth. Such blindness is distorting the true Christian claim of love for the other.

In Chapter 12, Paul shares a list of what has been going on and it isn't pretty – "quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder." Bad stuff! No wonder Paul is hurt and disheartened. No wonder he takes this personally. Such behavior should not take place in the Christian Church. It was funny at the Interim Minister meeting this week, one man reported that in his church they were reviewing the church history and there was a reference to someone being excommunicated from the church for gossip. The Interim Pastor reported that no one had been expelled lately, but that maybe, just maybe, they should keep that one about gossip on the books.

It surely fits the character of the letter when Paul urges the people to "make amends." It is time to "put things in order." Things are evidently in disarray in the early church of Corinth. Outsiders must certainly wonder at the bickering and disloyalty taking place. "Can this be the church they call 'new and different?'" Surely it must look pretty ordinary and petty to the outside observer. Is this what Christ came and died for?

We live in perilous times. Paul says (and remember that this is after only a mere 20 years) that Christians need to take their doctrine seriously. And this was well before the early Councils declared what the "doctrine" truly was. But Paul knew already! It is belief in the Trinity. It is a testimony that, in the words that he uses to close this letter, people live by the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit." The Trinitarian formula stated as a word of benediction by Paul to the church at Corinth.

I wonder what such a benediction would mean to most of our college graduates today. Over the years, the formula has become pretty, well what can I say, uninspiring. That may have begun with the Councils of Nicea and the early Creeds that followed. As soon as it was written down as formula, it lost some of its lifeblood. It's urgency and power. The Trinity became words, not energy.

When Paul spoke to the Corinthians, he felt this truth was the way to transformation. If people opened their hearts to Jesus, then they would come to know God. If God was known to them, then they would know the way to love. The Holy Spirit would empower them to share this love as the church. Everything he yearned for had to do with the church becoming a community of the faithful. Meaning not that they live without blemish or flaw, but that in seeking Christ they would learn how to live in relationship.

Paul saw the trinity then as having the power to transform people. Belief was an active verb! It was a happening! By necessity, the Trinity moves you to the table where others are viewed as friends before the One God. It is no longer about me, but rather about us living together. It is not a polarization of power and who is in control, as evidenced in the political struggle today, but a relationship that begins, at the very least, with respect and trust. Ultimately, it is all about relationship! And what Jesus can do for you when you open your heart.

These are indeed perilous times. We have always had wars at our (and by this I mean the world's) doorstep. Now we have an increased awareness of terrorism. Lesley and the other graduates entered college as 9/11 transformed the way we all think. And then in the shadow of such grave matters as this, and Aids and genocide and tsunami and steroids, we have people in the Senate attacking each other, choosing as they do to say others lack religious faith and character. Our church, broadened now from Corinth into the world, is in pretty bad shape!

I would urge all our graduates to go forth, holding Paul as a model and a mentor. It is time to acknowledge our differences. It is time to show some tolerance. No one is perfect. It is time to begin our discussions with respect. As I am sure you have heard before, though people disagree, there is no need to be disagreeable about it. It makes it tough when, as you engage in a discussion, it feels like you are in the midst of a verbal skirmish. When people snipe at each other all the time, it is a tough model for our maturing children. To see such demeaning and hurtful language.

I would urge our graduates to begin the task of living by heeding Paul's words of hope for the church – "Live in peace and the God of love and peace be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss." May the inspiration of a Christ within move our young people to transform this world we live in. In ways we, their seniors, have not been able to do. May they have the passion to act, after reflecting on God's word of love. With compassion and sensitivity. Not with a claim always on their own self-righteousness. May the Holy Spirit transform them to live and act for the regard of others. May they bring our world from polarization into just community. Not agreement necessarily, but respect at the very least! Isn't that what Jesus came to this world for? To transform our relationships and our ability to love one another? Isn't this where we – the church – are asked to begin.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.