

“LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD”

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Jeremiah 29:11-14a

John 14:23-27

If you ever doubt that times flies by quickly, go to a graduation of someone you love. Watch that person clad in gown and mortar board walk across the stage to receive their diploma, and your mind invariably goes back to the day he or she was born, their first day of school, their first dance, the day they got their driver's license. It's a bitter sweet time. Looking back, and looking ahead.

I've been to two graduations of people I dearly love recently, and you will not be surprised to hear that I went through a whole lot of Kleenex. I, indeed, thought on both occasions that it seems like just yesterday that they were born – and now, they were both graduating!

On both of those occasions, the graduation ceremony included commencement speeches. I have to say that one of them was terribly disappointing and the other one was outstanding!

You've all sat through commencement speeches, so you know what I'm talking about. Now, to be fair, giving a commencement speech is probably one of the toughest tasks there is. Face it, nobody really wants to hear what you have to say – they just want to get to the diplomas being given out, the receptions and parties afterward, and then maybe that time away at the beach with other graduates.

Having said that, I think there is a place for a speech at commencement ceremonies, and I think commencement speakers have a great opportunity to say some things that will inspire and encourage all who are listening.

While I was doing research for this sermon, I (just on a whim) googled “Best Commencement Speeches,” and ended up clicking on a list of “Ten Best Commencement Speeches.” And I have to agree – they were really good.

Perhaps one of the best I read was one that the late Steve Jobs (of Apple fame) gave to the graduating class of 2005 at Stanford University. In the speech, he basically told three stories (hmm, sounds like a sermon, huh?!).

His first story was about his birth to a single mother who gave him up for adoption. Just before the adoption was about to be completed, just when his birth mother was about to sign the papers, she discovered that the couple adopting him were not college graduates – in fact, the adoptive father hadn't even finished high

school. She refused to sign the adoption papers, until they promised her that they would see that Steve went to college.

Seventeen years later, he did, but discovered rather quickly it was not for him. He said he was taking all the required courses and was bored to death, and felt like he was wasting his parents' hard earned money. So he sort-of dropped out. When I say sort-of, he meant that he kept taking classes, but only those he liked.

One of those was a calligraphy class. It was really of no value to him, but he really liked it and learned a lot. Yet, years later, when he and his partner Steve Wozniak started Apple and created the Macintosh computer, calligraphy came in really handy, and the amazing typefaces were one of the things that set it apart from the competition and sent its sales soaring!

And none of that might have happened had Jobs not gone after what he loved, instead of what somebody else told him he should do.

His second story was about what he called "love and loss." Jobs and Wozniak turned Apple, which they started in Jobs' parents' garage when they were 20 years old, into a two billion dollar company in ten years. And then Jobs got fired. How? Well, they had hired a business manager with whom he had a falling out and the Board of Directors sided with the business manager. So Jobs was out of the company he had created.

At first, he was devastated. But with his beloved wife by his side, he started over, and he said it was like in those days at college when he was taking only classes that he loved. He was doing that all over again, and now he created things like Pixar and NeXT, and amazingly, eventually ended up back at Apple when they acquired NeXT. And 'til the day he died, Jobs loved his work.

Finally, his third story was about death. He told the graduates and the rest of the audience about how he had had a scare with cancer and what it did to his life. It made him live life more fully.

Here are some of the final words of his speech: "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you want to become. Everything else is secondary." (Steve Jobs, Stanford University Commencement, 6/12/05)

Now, that's a good commencement speech. I could have sat through that. But there was still something missing. Something big missing – the notion that you're not on the journey alone – which is why I chose the two scriptures for this morning's service that I chose – the lesson from Jeremiah and the one from the Gospel of John.

Hear some of those words again –

“Thus says the Lord . . . Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me.”

And from John –

“The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

And then, perhaps, the best words of all (especially for graduates going into an unknown future) –

“Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Life is hard enough, friends, without feeling like you’re having to do it all on your own. Job’s words were great. They were inspirational and encouraging, they were practical and hope-filled, but they needed one more thing – the assurance that on your journey you’re never alone – that the One who created you has plans for you, plans that are good for you, plans for a future with hope; that that same One is always there for guidance and comfort and strength; and the One in whom you can find peace in any situation you may face the rest of your life.

If we could give no other gift to graduates than knowing those things, that would be enough. But you know what – it’s not just for graduates, it’s what you and I need to remember every day of our lives.

Because life, life in this crazy world of ours, tries to teach us otherwise. It does try to make us feel like it’s all up to us, that we’re entirely on our own. It’s not a world that tells us it’s going to be okay, or offers us peace. Ours is a highly competitive, “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps”, “look out for number one” kind of world.

So hear these words from the Lord, my friends. You are not alone, and you are not on the journey of life without help. God has plans for you, and God is with you to guide and direct your path, and give you peace.

So, whether you’re graduating this year, or not, rest in these words from the Lord today. Know that you’re never alone, and if you will but turn to the Lord, He will guide your steps and make a way, and through it all, give you the peace that passes understanding. No graduation speech could ever have better news than that! Thanks be to God!

Amen.

Let's take a few minutes now to recognize those in our church family and extended church family who are graduating this year. Sandy Wherry, our Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries will lead us in that.