

The Gospel According to the Graduates of Seattle University

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In this beautiful cathedral, with the bright red of celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out, on this weekend of your graduation, I would like to entitle my remarks “The Gospel According to the Graduates of Seattle University”.

There is a Gospel According to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But each of our lives is also meant to be a gospel, a story of the good news of God’s gift, a story of faith lived, a story of Jesus of Nazareth made real and present today. So there can and should be a Gospel According to You the Graduates. What is that gospel?

How much is your gospel already written and formed? The original gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John took decades to take shape drawing on many sources. So too your gospel is bound to be unfinished, in the process of being formed, only beginning to come together. Can we see the shape it is beginning to have? Here’s my take on the Gospel According to the Graduates of Seattle University. See if I’m right or how you might see it differently.

There is a central proclamation in your gospel which is like an inaugural statement of a passion for justice, a profound care for the suffering and needy, a compassion for the poor, a fundamental commitment to service, almost a definition of yourselves as binding up the wounds of the world. You hardly needed to be asked over these years that ever-recurring Jesuit question: “How are you going to use your education and for whom will you use it?” I’m convinced that whereas in the other gospel the priest and the lawyer passed by the person beaten up by robbers and left lying in the ditch, you are fundamentally Good Samaritans who stop and dress wounds, bring the broken along with you on your journey, and provide for those who are abandoned or bruised by life. That’s gospel. That’s good news.

Suffusing your witness of good news is a sensitivity to the natural world, to creation, to the earth in its beauty and in its precarious and threatened condition. You have not needed to be told by us your elders, but you have told us that the greatest cause today is the very saving of the planet. It is your cause; your great cause; your mission. It’s not a mission we have sent you on; but one on which you invite us to join you: sustainability, environmental justice, ecological health, the saving of the earth. You’d have responded full-heartedly to Jesus of Nazareth’s oneness and aliveness with nature: the birds of the air, flowers of the field, flowing streams, mountains for prayer, trustingly asleep on the sea, leading and loving animals. In your gospel you follow him in this with enthusiasm and commitment.

At the heart of the gospel according to you is a gratitude for family as a place of joy, of forgiveness, of love. Universities tend to overlook their students’ gospel, their good news, about their families. We think we extract you from your families and have you all to ourselves, but we

don't and can't. You know and your cell phone calls prove that the deepest source of your gladness and the grounding of your gratitude in life is your family. One day you will create your own family, but there's time for that, time to enjoy and to live gratefully for others because of the gift of your family. I'm sure you know, as did the prodigal son or daughter, in the story Jesus of Nazareth told about God, the open arms, the joyful welcome, the coat, ring, and banquet with fatted calf, of the unconditionally loving and forgiving father and mother. That's gospel. That's good news.

There is a central chapter of your gospel which is in the process of being shaped. It's the chapter about your experience of the sacred, your spirituality, your faith, your exploration of who Jesus of Nazareth is and who God is. You may have had a random thought over a beer at The Comet, or tried a college essay about being an atheist—that's allowed—but I know you are not an atheist. (Very few are in America. In a survey of 3,014 persons only six identified themselves as atheists. They get far more press than they deserve.) Go ahead and admit it, you believe in God, in a Sacred One at the center of your life and experience. You are trying to learn and to say to yourself who this Sacred One is you intuit and encounter. You know also that Jesus of Nazareth—unlike and in a different way from anyone else you've studied—reveals who God is. You are intrigued by him, perhaps a bit uncomfortable with him. In your gospel you are like the woman at the well, or Nicodemus coming by night, both unsure about Jesus but unable to stay away, puzzled, yet moved within, in the dark but being enlightened by him. This central chapter in your gospel—if you enter into the conversation into which you are being invited—will enlighten and make coherent the whole of your good news.

Of course, there is a final pivot of the gospel according to you: your experiences of suffering, of death, and of unexpected new life. You can't escape this; and you have not escaped it. You've lived in these years—all of you without exception—some experience of the mystery of suffering and death. Perhaps it has been the suffering or death of a grandparent, maybe a high school classmate, another family member, a friend, a mentor, a neighborhood child, and for all of us the daily massive suffering and death in the world. You've been taken down into this, felt alone and helpless, without answers or adequacy in your experience of suffering and death. How has your heart been broken but opened, changed, become more compassionate, become more humbled, accepted living with human mystery, reached out in the midst of it for God? Have you, beyond all explanation, found new hope, deeper gratitude, greater dedication, a fuller, more alive self in and through this? That's the hardest, the biggest, and the best gospel. You know somewhere in you that the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the pivot both of the gospels and of your gospel. You already know this; you'll increasingly live it: both the mystery of human suffering and death and the unexplainable newness of life which comes from God within experience.

These are some chapters and themes of what I believe is the Gospel According to the Graduates of Seattle University. Am I right? Do I go too far? Do I not go far enough? How do you write the chapters and themes of your own gospel?

As the original gospels took decades to take shape, so too your gospels are in the process of being formed in the coming years. Three concluding remarks. One: I hope that you are able to draw from your education at Seattle University the materials for the shaping of your gospel.

Two: As for the original gospels so too for yours, they can only come together, come alive, and come to full faith, through the gift and pouring out upon you of the Holy Spirit whom we celebrate this weekend. Three: The original gospels took shape within communities, not along individualistic paths. Find a community of faith, and welcome, and exploration, and celebration, which will give shape to your gospel and to which you from your good news will give life.

Let me end with a prayer a prayer of the Jesuit, Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, which addressed to you is my encouragement and the hope of Seattle University for you this graduation weekend.

Patient Trust

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
 We are quite naturally impatient in everything
 to reach the end without delay.
 We would like to skip the intermediate stages.
 We are impatient of being on the way to something
 unknown, something new.
 And yet, it is the law of all progress
 that it is made by passing through
 some stages of instability -
 and that it may take a very long time.
 And so I think it is with you;
 your ideas mature gradually - let them grow,
 let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
 Don't try to force them on,
 as though you could be today what time,
 (that is to say, grace and circumstances
 acting on your own good will)
 will make of you tomorrow.
 Only God could say what this new spirit
 gradually forming in you will be.
 Give our Lord the benefit of believing
 that his hand is leading you,
 and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
 in suspense and incomplete.