

Think Again!

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Baccalaureate Service, March 1, 2009 Judson Memorial Church

Scripture texts: Luke 24:13-27 and Exodus 3:14-15

Welcome

I am grateful to stand in the pulpit this afternoon for this Baccalaureate service for the MIT academic year of 2008-2009. Tim and I would like to extend our thanks to the whole MIT community, faculty, staff, students, and family members, for the many ways that you have welcomed us with open arms and hearts. The past eight weeks with you have been full of the things that we treasure most, meaningful fellowship, shared learning, dedication to holistic theological education, and a deep commitment to Christian growth. It has meant so much for us to be able to share our ministries with you. We sincerely hope that God has answered our prayers that we would encourage, inspire and teach in ways that have been needed.

This afternoon I would like to challenge you with my message, "Don't Give Up. Think again!"

Let me begin with a story that took place a long way away from Yangon.

Introduction

Three summers ago, Tim, our two college-age sons, and I went on a 500 mile walking Christian pilgrimage. It took us a long time to complete our walk across Northern Spain—thirty-eight days. As we shared the experience we talked about many, many things. One day during the fifth week, my oldest son asked a question that made my mother's heart sing. As a parent, I had been waiting for his whole life, twenty years, for the question he asked. Can you guess what it was?

"Mom," TC said, "what do know now that you wish you had known when you were my age?" What a wise question for such a young man! It was my delight to offer him my answers and to discuss them together.

After being asked to preach during this Baccalaureate Service, I prayed about what message God would like me to bring to you. In my mind, I heard one of you ask a variation of my son's question: "What do you know now that you wish you had known when you graduated from seminary?"

Twenty-five years ago I was attending my own Baccalaureate Service, and during this silver jubilee year of my ordination it has been meaningful to think back to the time when I received my Master of Divinity Degree. I left seminary grateful for what I learned and hopeful about how I could serve the church. Looking back, I now see that I would have been a more effective minister if I had understood three things:

First: When God seems distant or absent we need to resist the desire to give up and instead, we need think again.

Second, When theological answers no longer make sense, we don't need to give up, we need to think again!

Third: When how we understood and experienced God is no longer adequate, when our lived experience demands that we change our understanding of who God is, we must resist giving up. We need to think again!

It is my sincere hope and prayer that this sermon will be helpful to you and to the people that you will soon be serving in whatever ministries lay ahead.

When God seems distant or absent, think again!

I wish that when I graduated from seminary that I had known that during the times when Christ seems very distant and perhaps even absent, He is actually present.

When I was fourteen years old, I went about 1400 miles away from my family to attend a boarding school. During my first year away I had a lot of growing up to do, including spiritually. I tried really hard to get in touch with God and find out more about who God was. In the evenings, I would take my guitar outside and sit alone under the stars, and sing my favorite spiritual songs. Then I would say a prayer, "God if you are out there, show yourself to me." Then I would wait. I don't know what I was hoping God would do. Maybe I thought God would speak in an audible voice from the skies. Or maybe I imagined that he would send some supernatural sign that would convince me once and for all of God's existence. But as far as I could tell, nothing happened.

Sometimes I would plead, "God, why don't you show yourself to me? Please, show yourself to me!" I sensed that there was more to religion than what I had learned, but I didn't have any idea what it could be. For some reason I couldn't explain, I just kept seeking God, even though God seemed far out of reach.

Later, after I became a Christian, when I read the Bible, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus came to mean a great deal to me and helped me to understand this early period of searching for Jesus. In the Emmaus story, as you remember, on the day of Christ's resurrection, two disciples, a man named Cleopas, and an unnamed companion (could it be an unnamed woman companion? I like to imagine it was!) were talking, trying to make sense of Jesus' death and the reported claims by some of his other followers that angels had told some of his female followers that he was alive.

On their seven-mile journey to the town of Emmaus, these two disciples were joined by another traveler who asked them what they were talking about. They were so dumfounded by the question that they stopped walking. Let me reread the story from Luke 24: 17b-21.

They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered [the traveler], "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" The traveler responded, "What things?" Cleopas and the other disciple replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

As readers of the Lucan gospel, we know that the third traveler was Jesus himself. When Cleopas finished telling his story, Jesus, whom Cleopas and his co-traveler did not recognize until later, taught them from the scriptures so that they could understand the true meaning of what had taken place.

What I find most meaningful about this encounter is that sincere disciples who were seeking deeper understanding of spiritual events completely missed God's presence with them! Actually, it's more dramatic than that. These two followers of Jesus

actually insulted Christ. They asked him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place in these days?”!

Can you see the ridiculousness of it? Jesus, who had been tortured and killed, was asked by those who had known and followed him, “Where were you? Why don’t you know the horrible things that happened?”! And they even called their beloved teacher, who they didn’t recognize, a stranger.

When I graduated from seminary, I didn’t realize that sometimes I would find it completely impossible to perceive God’s presence—even when I tried as hard as I could, even when Christ was as near to me as God possibly could be.

That was true when I was 13 years old, out in the field with my guitar. Since God didn’t come down in a lightening bolt or show up in any dramatic way, I thought God must be far away. I didn’t perceive that God was in my very longing to know him better, and that my persistent seeking was God’s way of leading me closer to Jesus’ loving arms. In fact, after nine months of persistent prayer, I went back home for the summer. While I was there a friend invited me to a church service where I heard the gospel message for the first time and committed my life to Christ.

Unfortunately, I can’t tell you that immediately I got better at recognizing God’s near presence. There have been many times in ministry when I asked God (silently so as not to upset those I was ministering to), “God, where are you?” It’s a natural question for people of faith. I found my heart asking it recently when I learned of the sudden death of a 6 year old granddaughter of one of my friends. As I am sure you can understand, I have asked it many, many times since arriving here in Myanmar.

I’m not sure how your prayers continue after, “God, where are you?” but I often add, “God, can’t you see how hard this is? Don’t you care about this suffering? Why aren’t you helping more?” It’s not that I want to be disrespectful of God, or that I don’t trust in God’s wisdom, it’s just that I need to share with God my lack of understanding and desire for justice.

Tim and I have had the privilege to share time with people all over the globe who have been going through deep suffering. Sometimes it is personal, but often it is systemic. We have wondered where God is, and why God is taking so long to make a difference. This fall when we were in Goma, in the Democratic of Congo, a week before the war broke out, we joined a day of prayer that had been called by the mayor of the town. With rebels drawing close to the city, killing, raping and looting as they came, prayer was intense and very specific. In our most honest moments, I think we all wondered if God was going to help. In other words, we were asking, “God where are you?”

While we feared that God was not going to help, in reality God was as close as the next person in our pew. Gathered with us were the doctors and nurses that healed those who were shot, raped or hacked with machetes. In that chapel were pastors and community leaders who were developing programs that addressing the dire needs of the villages around us. In that chapel were the rape victims who were encouraging one another as they awaited fistula surgeries to repair the damage that had been done. Where was God? When I thought again, I realized: God was right there.

**When your theological answers are inadequate, welcome good questions.
They will help you think again!**

On the eve of my seminary Baccalaureate, I felt so grateful for all that I had learned. Completing all the required classes meant that I had come to understand a great deal about Church History, Theology, the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures, and Practical Theology. My field education placements in churches and hospitals had prepared me to serve a local church as a pastor. I was leaving seminary gratefully knowing a great deal both theoretically and practically.

Obviously church leaders need sound theological answers to the big questions of life and faith. For these, we can thank the many thoughtful scholars and Christian leaders through the centuries who have gone before us as well as our professors who have taught us.

To be effective in ministry, we also must have good questions that will guide us towards deeper understanding and growth.

I've always loved questions. One of my all-time favorite quotes is from the book, *Letters to a Young Poet* written by the seasoned German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. He advised his young reader,

"I beg you...to be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers."

Rainer Maria Rilke. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Translated by M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1934), 35

I recently found the Bible I read right after I committed my life to Christ. In the back are four pages of questions that came to me as I read through it for the very first time. At that time the questions seemed so big that I thought I would never understand their answers, but now, thirty-seven years later, I have solid answers for almost all of them.

I was twenty-six when I graduated from seminary and was called to serve a church as one of its ministers. One of the steps to being ordained as an American Baptist pastor involved presenting a lengthy written statement of faith to an examining group of lay leaders and ministers. We were expected to give our own answers to all the big theological questions that a minister needed to address. After we read the statement, we needed to orally answer any questions that those in the meeting wanted to ask. In order to assume pastoral leadership I was required be comfortable with giving answers, and rightfully so.

If I had had a mentor s/he might have helped me to understand that as a minister I also needed to be comfortable living with big theological questions that did not have readily available answers. For many years now I have begun each day by writing down a question that I don't expect to answer right away. The question itself doesn't matter to me as much as discipline of identifying something I really don't know. It is a daily reminder to myself to stay curious and engaged in life.

Sometimes I write down big questions like "Why do all the major religions in the world value women less than men?" Or, they might be more personal, "How will God love me today?" My questions sometimes relate to a book I am reading, "What can the author possibly mean when she talks about Christian atheism?" or to something I

have recently experienced, “How is the woman who meditating so intently at the Buddhist temple different because of her devotional practice?”

Ministry related questions are important too. Perhaps you will want to keep a list that come up based on your experience of serving as a pastor, administrator, or teacher. My list includes questions like, “How could my teaching have been more effective today?” “What is the value of my pastoral visit to the woman who is unresponsive and in a coma?” “What text should I preach on to really speak to and touch the needs of those who will be in church?” “What can I say to the family of the boy who committed suicide that will be of lasting help them in the midst of their shock and grief?” “What does God want me to say “Yes” to?” “How is my life answering God’s question, ‘Are you doing justice?’ Micah 6:8) I choose who I can trust with my important questions, I certainly don’t share all my questions with others, and I don’t limit myself. I give myself permission to ask every question that comes to my mind and heart.

When we are actively pursuing God, questions will come because God is always larger than our experience. As we come to know God better, the answers that once made sense will not be adequate for the spiritual challenges that we face. God uses questions to draw us closer to the truth. As pastors and church leaders it is important that we have answers for those we serve. But having answers doesn’t mean that we don’t also have questions. Loving questions is one of methods God uses to help us to mature. No matter what question that appears in your mind or heart, I believe that God is big enough to handle it even if other people can’t.

We need to be courageous enough to admit when the answers we once felt were adequate, aren’t as useful. Then, we need to resist giving up. Instead, we need to think again!

When God Isn’t Who You Thought, Think Again!

This leads us to my third and final point. I wish that I had known better—understood more fully—when I graduated from seminary that God is always greater than who I imagine God to be.

In Exodus 3:14-16 when God told Moses to go to the Israelites and tell them of God’s plan to liberate the Israelites from the Egyptians, Moses asked God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

Do you remember God’s response?

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’...This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

A man named J B Phillips once wrote a book called *Your God is Too Small*. His point was simple to understand, but harder to live with. He wrote that all through life we discover that who we think God to be just isn’t true. God is always bigger and more complicated than we can imagine or understand.

As a hospital chaplain named Greg Garrett, who recently wrote a book called *Stories from the Edge: A Theology of Grief* (Westminster, 2008) explains, each of us has a working idea of who God is, and it’s always good enough, until something in our lives changes and our understanding doesn’t fit anymore. That’s when we have a choice. “I

guess God just isn't who I thought" and give up on trying to know God better or, we can think again.

Tim and I knew that when we came to Myanmar our understanding of God would change. One of the gifts of traveling outside one's own culture is that it allows one to get beyond one's own understandings of how things are, and grow. Sure enough, since we have been here I have been stretched to understand God in new ways. By listening to your stories, by carefully observing, by pondering the things that haven't made sense and by reading Asian feminist theologians, I have sought to be open to understanding God more fully.

I first studied liberation theology in 1981 and one of the fields of study for my Ph.D. degree was in Feminist Studies. I have always known God as one who is concerned about those who have the least power and I have tried to be faithful to that knowing in my life and ministry.

Yet, as I have lived, worked, and worshipped alongside you here, God has shown me more about God's deep caring nature. I have come to know and believe more in God's love for those who are suffering unjustly. Knowing God more deeply in this way means that my life is changing in ways that I can't necessarily predict or control. To be honest, that scares me a little.

While I've been here I've also been working with a French colleague on project that relates to Mary in the Chartres Cathedral in France. Each day I have studied one image of Mary and then written a poem or essay about it. This past week I considered an image of Mary as she meets Jesus carrying the cross. In response I wrote a poem called, *Suffering Together*. I hope that as I read it you can hear this expanded understanding of God as one who cares for those who suffer unjustly.

Suffering Together

To share the unjust suffering of another
is heart-wrenching,
difficult,
depleting,
painful,
important,
dangerous,
and sacred.

Love leads us places we never expected or desired to go.
Yet we find ourselves exactly where we want to be.
To share the crushing burdens of those who are being wronged
is a form not only of consecrated resistance,
but also of divine comfort and hope.

As leaders we must be committed to growing. Growing means changing, something that doesn't seem to be natural for most people. Once, when the Dali Lama came to Minneapolis where I live, I was very blessed to be able to go and hear him speak. He asked us to answer the question, "How is your spiritual practice different than it was a year ago?" When we had had time to think about it, he said, "If it is the same as it used to be, you have a problem!"

Let me ask you to consider, “How is your understanding of who God is different than it was last year?” “How is your understanding of God different than when you entered seminary?” I hope that your learning and experiences during these years of seminary have caused you to need to think again and again. And I pray that as you minister, you will have the courage to keep getting to know God better and better.

As we mature in our faith, we discover that we don’t know God as well as we think we do. And over time we become comfortable admitting that who we are sure God is today, isn’t the whole of who God is—it’s just as much about God as we can know right now. It is our goal and responsibility to stay engaged in our relationship with Christ so that we keep getting to know God better.

When you discover that God isn’t who you thought, don’t give up—
please, oh please, think again!!!

Concluding Comments:

This is a very special service of celebration. Congratulations on completing all the requirements for your degree! As you move toward the ministries that lie ahead, I hope you will remember:

1. When God seems distant or absent, don’t give up. Instead, think again!
2. When your theological answers are inadequate, don’t give up. Instead, think again!
3. When God isn’t who you thought, don’t give up. Instead, think again!

May God bless your ministries for his sake and for the sake of all who you will serve.
Amen!