

*Graduation Day*

June 5, 2011 Easter 7A

John 17:1-11

Pastor Vern Christopherson

It's graduation time. The band plays *Pomp and Circumstance*. Students walk across the stage to get their diploma. Caps get tossed in the air and a loud cheer goes up. It's a rite of passage. Many of *these* young men and women will be leaving home. They'll be on their way to bigger and better things.

There's a script for growing up and leaving home that's written into the fabric of our culture. I bet you know what it is. It goes like this: You have to study hard in your classes so you can get good (grades). You have to get good grades so you can get into a good (college). You have to get into a good college so you can get a good (job). You have to get a good job so you can make a lot of (money). And if everything goes well, you'll fall in love, get married, have 1.8 children and a dog, and live happily ever (after).

You know this script. So, is it working? Is it working for our graduates? Considering the tight job market and rising student loans and the revolving door at home, maybe not as well as it once did. There seem to be any number of twists and turns and roadblocks on the path to adulthood. I have a son, Erik, who graduated with a major in philosophy. Six years later he's back in college finishing up a major in math. I have a daughter, Ingrid, who graduated with a degree in English. Four years later she's working for an insurance company. In today's world, about the only thing that's certain is this: growing up and leaving home is a lot more complicated than it used to be.

The setting for today's gospel is a little like a graduation. Jesus has just finished three years of teaching with twelve of his closest students. They've got names like Peter and Andrew, James and John. The classes Jesus taught were generally pass-fail and—unfortunately—he didn't grade on a curve. No, there were times when these students failed miserably. But, out of the goodness of his heart, Jesus kept giving them another chance.

Now, as graduation day draws near, what do you suppose these students want to do with the rest of their lives? The answer is really pretty simple: they want to stay with their teacher. They'll soon find out, however, that that won't be possible.

This graduation is different. Instead of the *students* packing up and leaving home, it's the *teacher* who's going to be leaving. He's not moving on to a new school. He's not

heading into retirement. He's leaving them in order to lay down his life on a cross. What happens after that, nobody really knows.

Before Jesus says goodbye, he stops to pray. His words are directed to heaven, but he speaks just loud enough so everyone in the room can hear them. His prayer goes something like this: "Father, it's time. The cross is just around the corner. I've done everything you asked me to do. I've taught my followers about you. Now I pray that they may continue to know you and have life in you—eternal life. That's why I came, so I could point people to your love; so I could give you all the glory. Father, as I prepare to return to you, I'll be leaving my students behind. There's work still to do—my work, your work, important work. Bless them in that work, Father. Take good care of them. Keep them close to you and close to each other. Amen."

What's interesting to me about this prayer is how different it feels from our all-American script. There's nothing about good grades...or good schools...or well-paying jobs...or even about following your dreams. It's not that these things are bad, mind you, it's just that sometimes—if we don't watch out—they can become all consuming. In contrast, Jesus' concern for his graduates boils down to just three things: that they find true life in him...that they continue the work he started...and that they find some other believers to do it with, because—let's be honest—the work of Jesus is a lot more fun when we're doing it together.

What kind of graduation is this? An upside down graduation. The teacher is leaving. The students are staying behind. They're not heading off to something bigger and better. Instead, they're being called—summoned, if you will—to give away their lives for others. I wonder if it feels like it's enough for them.

This past week, columnist David Brooks had an article on graduation in the Post Bulletin. It had a provocative title, "Graduates, your calling is really not about you." Brooks was responding to several commencement addresses he'd heard over the last few weeks. He noted that graduates are being sent into the world amid rapturous talk of limitless possibilities: follow your passion, chart your own course, march to the beat of your own drummer. Says Brooks: this is the litany of excessive individualism, which is the dominant note of our culture. Look inside, chase your dreams, it's all about you.

In response, Brooks argues that life's callings don't work that way. We don't look inside and then plan a life. It's much better if we look outside of ourselves and find a problem. That problem, in turn, will summon a life out of us. For example, a relative suffers from Alzheimers's and a young woman feels called to help cure the disease. A young man works under a miserable boss, and must develop management skills so he and his department can function. Another young woman finds herself confronted by an opportunity she never thought of, in a job category she never imagined. This wasn't in her plans, but this is where she can make her mark.

I liked Brooks' article. It truth be told, it sounded a little like Jesus. Graduation is not meant to be all about us. If you want to make a mark in this world, it's about looking outside of yourself and finding a problem, and then seeing if you feel called to do something about it. If you happen to be a Christian, it's about looking to Jesus and finding an alternative script. Let me say it again: there's nothing wrong with good grades, and good colleges, and good jobs, and making a decent living. It's just that, at the end of the day, you might want to ask yourself: Is it enough? Will it be enough for the way God has made me?

Here's a question: What do you think Jesus wants us to do? Probably some of the same things he did while on earth. Feed the hunger, heal the sick, care for the poor, listen to the lonely, welcome the stranger, comfort the dying, stand up for the down-and-out. But it's more than that. Jesus wants us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. One of the ways we do this is by going about our daily work as if everything we do counts for God. It's true. Whether we're developing a new computer program at IBM or bottling milk at AMPI or raising children or coaching a little league baseball team, if we do these things as the hands and feet of God in the world, then God will take whatever ordinary things we offer and bless them and make of them something extraordinary.

Before you leave today, I encourage you to check out the pictures and information sheets of our graduating seniors in the hallway. In response to the question, "How do you think God might use you?" there's a wonderful variety of answers. Zach Goslee said: "To educate and make a difference in the lives of children." Tori Kent said: "As I finish college, my hopes are to work in another country helping others, influenced by the Holy Spirit." Madi Lenz said: "I hope to be working as the hands and feet of the Lord." Halle Owecke said: "I look forward to doing God's work in a healing profession as a physical therapist."

Josie Peterson said: “I hope to continue teaching Sunday School wherever God takes me.” And finally, in a moment of honesty, Sam Attlesey-Pries said. “I don’t know [how God might use me], but I’m open to suggestions.”

When you get right down to it, all God asks of any of us is to be open to suggestions. To look outside of ourselves, find a problem, and then wait to see if God is calling us to do something about it.

Christy Martenson of Zumbro was open to suggestions. During her final year of college, she felt a nudge in the direction of teaching and public service. She didn’t know what she was going to do about it, but she was open. Then one day she heard about a program called Teach for America. It was an opportunity, if you want to call it an opportunity, to serve in some of the poorest schools in the country. Christy was no stranger to service. She learned it at Zumbro. She’d volunteered for service projects in Rochester. She’d gone on two Appalachian mission trips and another trip to a reservation in Oklahoma. So when Teach for America came calling, she signed up. She gave two years to teaching in Thoreau, New Mexico, on the edge of a Navajo reservation. Says Christy: “Those two years changed my life. Because of my time with the Navajo children, I firmly believe that every child can learn...and we can’t let a child’s circumstances or zip code dictate his or her educational achievement. Working in a highly impoverished community forced me to look beyond myself to the needs of my students and their families.” Christy concludes: “Serving others is one of the best ways to serve God.”

Today is graduation day at Zumbro. It’s an upside down graduation. The teacher has left, but we’re still here. Somewhere along the line, the script has gotten changed. Jesus did it. It’s not all about us. It’s about a cross, and a teacher who was willing to lay down his life for others. The teacher is praying for us right now: that we may find true life in him, and that we may continue the work he started, that we may find some other believers to do it with.

So, what do you say, are you open to suggestions? Want to make to mark in this world? If so, get ready to serve. And get ready for your life to be changed. Amen.