

“THE GIFT YOU BRING”
UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF THE TWIN CITIES
COMMENCEMENT
MAY 17, 2009
Kita McVay, President

It is a great honor to share this day with you – the Class of 2009 and all of you who have gathered to celebrate the accomplishment that this day marks. Many members of the graduating class began their studies at United about the same time I moved from the boardroom to the president’s office, and as we’ve journeyed together, these students have been an abiding inspiration. I am deeply grateful for the invitation to speak today and keenly aware of the rare privilege I have been given to work with you and all of the United community.

Now, let me ask you: Do you know how rare you are?

This year, universities and professional schools in the United States will confer almost 600,000 master’s degrees. One hundred forty-six thousand graduates will be masters of business administration. 174,000 will be in education. And 7000, slightly more than one percent, will go to people including you, who receive master’s degrees in theology and religious vocations. You chose the road less traveled. And it’s true, the skeptic might say, “Well, just how many theologians does this world need?” But here you are – tried and tested: Over years of study, you have read learned texts; you have written countless papers and crammed for exams; you have labored to learn the arts of preaching, teaching, and creating worship services of beauty and inspiration; you have nurtured your own spiritual lives; and you have confronted the question of what the demanding ethics of your faith mean for your own life.

And ... why? My strong hunch is that most of the people who receive master’s degrees this year are motivated by the desire to have their lives and their work serve the needs of humankind. When it comes to all of you, this is more than a hunch. I know from my conversations with you that the compelling motivation for persevering through years of study is to become a part of the world-transforming and life-transforming movement that Christianity has the power to be.

The Scriptures we have just heard are visionary texts that remind us of that transformative power. First we received a vivid portrayal of a primordial paradise with its slowly unfolding layers of a beautiful and orderly world, created by an all-powerful God. In the crowning moment, God creates humankind in God’s own image, so that humans have a special place. They are to exercise stewardship and care for all of creation. In this paradise, pulsing with abundant, peaceful life, God has endowed humans with enormous power – and enormous responsibility.

This was a vision, a hoped-for reality set forth by writers who already knew a history of slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon.

Centuries later, a new story began. The Hebrew people again were far removed from that paradisiacal vision in Genesis 1. Under Rome's harsh rule, they were miserable and scared, impoverished and intimidated.

In this world of misery and meager hope, Jesus dared, as he began his ministry, to proclaim a new world, in words called up from the prophet Isaiah in the time of the Babylonian exile. Jesus set forth for his listeners a courageous vision of a world with good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed – all to usher in the longed-for reality of peace, justice, abundance. There was only one way to journey towards the far-off ideal: Jesus called humans to claim their identity as reflections of God by loving God and one another. He called humans to accept the power and responsibility conferred on them at Creation, to join him in the bold project of moving towards a world in which all humans and all creation can flourish.

Something deep within each of you called you to seminary, seeking the skills to make this transformative vision of transcendent good the basis for your work in the world. You have the tools, honed if not yet perfected, to preach and teach and conduct worship and manage the affairs of an organization. But when I asked you what was the greatest gift that United had given you, you did not answer with any of those. You answered: United gave me a theological voice, the ability to think coherently about and help interpret the questions facing us and our society in the context of our understanding of God, of transcendent good, of ultimate meaning.

And how urgently we need that voice in our time. Think about how the world has changed in just the few years since you began your seminary journey: we are a country at war; the economic foundations we had come to rely on are collapsing around us; shortages of essential resources, from food to oil, have bubbled up; hard decisions about how scarce resources will be shared among a growing world population are looming; scientists have moved from debating whether global warming is real to debating what must be done if we are to survive. And in the midst of all of this, can you identify any unifying principles that we agree upon and employ to guide the path? If ever there were a time for a credible, coherent, convincing theological voice to be lifted to shape the trajectory of the future, this surely would be it.

And that voice is your gift to the world. What will you do with this gift?

It seems to me that there are two important ways your voice will reverberate. Like Jesus, who announced his vision and proceeded to perform works to bring it about, you will exercise your voice through your actions and the actions you inspire, and through the vision of new possibilities that you help individuals and communities to construct.

From the earliest days of the church, acts of justice and generosity have given voice to theological commitment, to what people believed God intended for the world. We claim with pride this activism and it continues today in church communities – in this very church, throughout our city, around the world.

But, as with Jesus' ministry, action emerges from a vision that inspires response.

Peter Senge, an engineer and social systems expert who has been named “strategist of the century,” has focused his work on leadership in organizations. He has a vision: that all people should have the opportunity to work productively toward common goals and be active participants in shaping the reality they seek. He’s talking mostly to businesses, but it sounds a lot like what churches seek to do. The first and arguably most important principle is the primacy of the shared vision – not a boilerplate vision statement, but what he calls shared “pictures of the future we seek to create,” visions that have the power to generate enthusiasm, commitment, and action. We all need to be strategists like that – imagining the world we want to create and using the image to guide for our decisions and our actions.

Deena Katz describes a vision statement as an “architectural rendering of what [reality] will look like once it is successfully established.” The reality can only be achieved if there is a vision of what it is to be. And that rendering by definition will reflect and incorporate certain previously agreed-upon principles. What are the principles that are the foundation for a rendering that reflects our theological commitments?

During your years in seminary, our country has also been buffeted by the cultural wars about religion – a surge of orthodoxy coming from the religious right, and a countervailing, and lately even louder, backlash from the likes of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris – Bill Maher even made a movie to make his point – who proclaim religion must die. The voice of the mainline has been all but lost in the crossfire.

But you nevertheless chose what Gary Dorrien calls “a liberal third way,” a way between orthodoxy and secularism that is characterized by an approach to theology based on reason and critical thinking and open inquiry; an approach that has “worked constantly to integrate the best human knowledge with the Christian tradition.” You stand in a tradition that is, at its best, a tradition of openness, tolerance, and generosity. With your theological voice, you can claim boldly the powerful, creative, and transformative possibilities that flow from your core understandings of the faith: They were calling to us from the stories we read today:

The goodness of creation and our inextricable connection to it

The imprint of God that inhabits every human

The responsibility that humans carry for stewardship of the world

The conviction that love conquers all

The imperative that humans show love of God by working for the well-being of their neighbor

These can be the unifying principles for the new world we design and begin to construct.

But changing the world is a bold and risky business. The ever-present backdrop of Jesus' death looms as an unsettling reminder of that. As you lead and walk with people who seek a different world, hang on tightly to those critical thinking skills that you apply to theological interpretation. Everywhere you turn, you will be confronted with questions about what this vision of fulfillment means when it comes to making hard decisions.

Theology does not have all the answers; it has a framework for addressing the questions. We live in an unbelievably complex world. Knowledge and information are proliferating at an unprecedented pace. Remember John Stuart Mill's admonition that suppression of opinion may blot out truth, that opinions must constantly be tested and retested. As we set our sights on a new world and then grapple with how it should be brought about, passion will collide with complexity. Dynamic tension between competing solutions and action plans will demand that you seek out the best knowledge and the best wisdom and not settle for the easy answer. The credibility of the vision depends upon open minds and open hearts. You are among the rare few who have invested your precious time, your arduous effort, and your financial sacrifice to purchase the gift of a theological voice. What will you do with this gift?

We look to you to help people everywhere find their theological voices, to define the compelling principles of our faith, to create shared pictures of what the world might look like if we apply those principles, and to grapple with what we must do to build a new world. You can call the world, one by one, community by community, to new possibilities.

And so, we send you forth today, Graduates of United Theological Seminary's Class of 2009,

Go forth with joy.

Go forth with courage for the journey.

Go forth knowing that we are listening for your theological voice.