

A Prayer for our Graduates
John 14:27-31
Colossians 1:9-12

Graduate Sunday
Port Williams United Baptist Church
Dr. Don Flowers, Jr.

You probably don't give it a lot of thought on Sunday morning, what you will wear. Especially now! In this virtual world the questions range from which pair of sweat pants, do I take a shower before or after watching the service. Things are simpler!

But for me? Sunday mornings are a time of decision. Which tie will I wear today? A normal tie or a bowtie? And which one will actually go with the theme of the day? (Didn't know that I gave that much thought to my ties, did you? Probably didn't care either, but it is true!)

And then there is the question about which stole to wear. There are certain seasons where that decision is made. Purple for Advent and Lent; White for Epiphany and Easter. Red on Pentecost and Reformation Sunday. But the rest of the year?

The rest of the year it is green, signifying ordinary time. And a green stole for over half the year does become ordinary, even boring. That is why I normally mix and match my stoles—not unlike my ties. Which one sends the right message? Again, you probably never wondered why that stole on this day, and probably didn't care. You just thought it looked nice!

But today is one of those days, one of those days when all those concerns are set aside. Today is the day in which we recognize and celebrate with our graduates, and so in camaraderie with them I am wearing my doctoral hood.

I could wear it all the time, I guess. I did work hard to get that degree. The dissertation is sitting on my bookshelf if you have trouble falling asleep at night. I still have nightmares that I have to finish it by Thursday or will be kicked out of the program. (In that dream I always think, "Yeah, yeah, I can write 250 pages in 3 days!") So in some ways I like wearing this hood once a year to keep the nightmare at bay!

Graduations are significant occasions, even if we pooh pooh them. But they mark a shift, a change in time, a change in life. They mark a change, and changes are hard.

Jesus recognized that. He knew he was leaving and so he shared some wisdom with his disciples. Things are going to change. You are going to grieve, and that is okay. That is what happens. But know you aren't alone. My spirit will be with you; you will have each other; love each other. Just do that, remember everything I taught you and everything will be fine.

The disciples didn't understand it at the time. Philip even said, "We don't know what you are talking about!" They did later, but at the time.... They didn't understand it, but I think Jesus needed to say it.

When I was leaving Greenville, SC my mentor, friend, wise person, Hardy Clemons gave me some wonderful advice. He said, *"There are people who need to say some things to you and you need to listen. And there are some things you need to say to some people, and you need to say them. It will be hard, but it will make the leaving and the grieving easier."*

He was right. It was hard, but it did make the leaving easier.

Parents, I hope you hear that. I know you think you have told your child everything that she needs to hear, all the things you have tried to drill into her over these years. But tell them again! Tell them because you need to say it!

And graduates, please listen. Don't roll your eyes and say, "Mom!" "I know Dad!" Listen, because it is a gift you can give them. And you never know how much it will mean later, on that night when you are in your dorm room all alone and feel so far away, when more than anything in the world you just want to hear, "I love you" from your parent.

Your parents need to say some things to you, and so do we, our church family. As you have seen, we have watched you grow up. The people in our congregation have a vested interest in you! They want you to know how proud they are of you, of the person you have grown to be.

So today, on their behalf I want to share our prayer with you. It isn't a prayer like the ones we normally pray, but things like the prayer Jesus gave his disciples, some wisdom for the days ahead.

And this isn't my wisdom. No, these are words that I have picked up over the years, things I have read or heard thinking, "I wish I had said that!"

Like the wisdom Robert Fulghum shared with the world in his wonderful book, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*. He wrote, "All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

- Share everything.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- Wash your hands before you eat.
- Flush.
- Warm cookies and milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life--learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

- Take a nap every afternoon.
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we all like that.
- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the styrofoam cup--they all die. So do we.
- And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned--the biggest word of all--LOOK.

He continues. .. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or you work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all--the whole world--had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are--when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."¹

That is important stuff to know. Fulghum is right! A lot of what is important we learn early in life. Other parts we just grasp as we get older. Shortly after she turned 70, Maya Angelou was on the Oprah show. She shared that at her age she had learned a few things. She said:

I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow.

I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights.

I've learned that regardless of your relationship with your parents, you'll miss them when they're gone from your life.

I've learned that making a "living" is not the same thing as "making a life."

I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance.

I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands. You need to be able to throw something back.

I've learned that whenever I decide something with an open heart, I usually make the right decision.

I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one.

I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone.

¹ Robert Fulghum, 1990. Found in Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten* Villard Books: New York, 1990, page 6-7.

People love a warm hug, or just a friendly pat on the back.

I've learned that I still have a lot to learn.

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,
but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Some things I hope you have learned early, some things I hope you will learn as you get older. But there are a few things I hope you have already learned, things that you have heard over and over here, in this place.

My guess is that you know them. You hear them almost every week as we come to close the service, the words of the benediction I use, that I borrow from some mentors, wise people. You know the words, because from time to time, when we are together I see some of you mouthing them along with me! Those are the times when I get so wrapped up with you that I forget what I am saying!

But they are true! It is not only the way we close worship, but my prayer for you.

I do pray that knowing you are surrounded by the grace and love of God, that you will be willing to risk something big for something good. Take chances. Always be willing to speak the truth, especially to power. We have seen in this past year how much we need people to say what is true, especially when it is uncomfortable, when it challenges our assumptions, our prejudices. Take that risk!

Never sell yourself short! You are an original, one of a kind and God needs you, we need you to be you. Don't give that up. Never give up your power to anyone. Never allow someone else to make you feel less than.... Be yourself!

In a few days you are going to graduate, and then you will be off! Your life will change. That is so exciting, and so terrifying! But know that as you go, you go with our blessing. A blessing is a way of saying that as you go, you go with our prayers, our hopes, our best wishes for your future. It is our way of saying that what happens to you matters. It is our way of saying that as you go, we pray that you will take some of us with us, even as we will hold you in our hearts.

We look forward to seeing what you and God will; do together. So congratulations.

Go now. With our blessings and with God's peace.