

“HOW NOT TO LOSE HEART”

Jeremiah 18:1-6; 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:1, 7-10, 16-18

May 17, 2014 | Austin College Baccalaureate

Look at you!

You are all just gorgeous.

You're less than twenty-four hours away
from one of the biggest days of your life.

You done did it.

I suspect that by now,

all the papers are turned in,

all the fines are paid off,

most of the dorms and apartments are packed up,

and the Class of 2014 is ready to go!

The adventures are just beginning.

This is a very cool time.

In the words of the great prophet Dr. Seuss,

“You have brains in your head.

You have feet in your shoes

You can steer yourself

any direction you choose.

Oh, the places you'll go!ⁱ”

No wonder you all look so happy tonight.

But, if you keep reading in the Gospel According to Seuss,
he has this to say:

“Out *there* things can happen,

and frequently do,

to people as brainy and footsy as you.”

This is the part that probably no one but Dr. Seuss

has told you about yet.

No one *wants* to tell you this

because they know how happy you are to be graduating.

And THEY are happy that you're graduating!

Are they ever!

But there's this dirty little secret that you need to know, my friends.
And if they won't tell you, I will.

Walt Disney lied to us.

Those fairy tales were wrong about living happily ever after.

You're not going to be happy all the time

from now on,

just because you have a college degree.

I don't care **what** Pharrell Williams says.

We're going to have those times, for sure,

when we can clap along if we feel that happiness is the truth.

Overall, life is going to be pretty good.

But those happy times are not going to be twenty-four-seven.

Think about it –

not all of your days were happy while you were *here*, were they?

A bunch of them, for sure, but not every one of them.

I remember!

But here's the other part of that little secret.

The good news, my friends, is this:

it's not about being happy.

It's about not losing heart.

David Brooksⁱⁱ noted in the New York Times last month
that in a three month period,

more than a thousand books were released on Amazon
on the topic of happiness.

I guess we're only a *little* obsessed

with thinking that happiness is the end goal.

Brooks goes on to say that

“People shoot for happiness,
but they feel *formed* by suffering.”

“Happiness wants you to maximize your benefits,” he says.

But suffering, according to Brooks,

“sends you on a different course.”

Second Corinthians would call that “not losing heart.”

Let me tell you about my friend Maribeth Culpepper,
who lives in the bustling burg of Aztec, New Mexico.
Maribeth is a renaissance woman.
She teaches social work at the local college.
She helped her brother-in-law build the house that she lives in.
She works with the children's Sunday School class
at Aztec Presbyterian,
and she's about to moderate the Synod of the Southwest.
And, she's a potter.
She's been throwing and building pots for a long time,
but only recently has she gotten into making the kind of pottery
known as raku.

Now I'm about to venture outside my realm of knowledge,
but a liberal arts degree allows you to do that with some authority!
Some of y'all have been studying art here for the last 4 years,
and **you** could probably give *all of us* a lecture
on the finer points of creating pottery.
That's lovely, but that's not what I'm up to tonight.
So bear with me!

Look at this little pot that she gave me the other day.
It was bound for the trashcan,
but she thought twice about it and decided that I might be interested.
And, golly, she was right!
Sorry if you can't see it very well from where you are.
I'll try to describe it for you.

Maribeth says that in order to do raku,
you have to add sand to the clay
so that it can tolerate the fluctuations of heat
that it will encounter in the kiln.
And you have to knead the clay to work out the air bubbles
as you incorporate the sand.

If you don't work out the air bubbles
and get the clay to all the same consistency,
your pot's not going to make it through the fire.
Only when you're satisfied with the clay,
and ultimately with the shape of the pot,
do you then glaze it with the colors you like
and get it ready for firing.

When you're throwing a pot for firing in a *regular* kiln,
you have some idea of what to expect.
When you're doing *raku*, however,
you throw the pot and paint it with glaze,
but that's where the similarities ends.
From there you have absolutely no idea what's going to come out.
A raku kiln is hot, hot, hot.
And in that red hot atmosphere
is where things happen that are invisible to the eye.
That kind of heat and pressure
puts any sturdy vessel to the test
and makes any kind of imperfections evident.
If there is an undetected weakness in the pot,
it will fall to pieces under the pressure of the fire.
The heat will also do things to the glaze that you never intended.
It may turn out to be another color entirely.
It doesn't matter what kind of glaze you give it -
that white-hot heat will create colors for that pot
that you never imagined.

Something was not right with this little pot,
but Maribeth didn't know it
until she looked into the peephole in the kiln
and saw her white-hot project begin to slump over
and take on this little lip looking thing on the side.
Right then she considered ditching the pot-to-be and starting over.
But instead she decided it might be a good experiment

to continue on and see what happened.

While it was still in the kiln,
Maribeth wadded up a bunch of newspaper
and got a little nest ready for it.
When the time came, she took her tongs
and took the pot out of the kiln
and threw it into the pile of newsprint.
It was still so hot that it set the newspaper on fire!
Once it had finished burning,
the pot was almost translucent.
But the glaze had cracked all over it, inside and out,
and made this really cool pattern.
And the burning newsprint eventually turned into ash,
and the carbon from the ash became part of the glaze
and colored in the lines, if you will.

*In every way,
the finished product bore the marks
of the trauma it had endured.*

And she was going to throw it away!
I think it's gorgeous,
and I will find some use for it in my study.
But you know,
I am hoping that its best and highest use may be right here.

Look at this thing.
It's been thrown, painted, dried,
tossed into an incredibly hot oven,
had its intended colors changed under pressure,
and was marked by a fire started by its own heat.
Sounds like finals week, doesn't it?
This is not a happy piece of clay.
But it's not about the pot's happiness.
If this little vessel had not gone through such trauma,

it wouldn't be nearly as strong
and
its colors would not shine nearly as bright.
The sad story of this pot's formation
is what gives it a distinctive beauty.
And so it does not lose heart.

And, look at you. Just look at you.
Each and every one of you –
students, parents and grandparents, children, friends,
Golden Roos, faculty, staff, trustees –
each and every one of us
have been perfectly designed by our Creator
for purposes that only the Creator fully understands.
But you weren't designed for total happiness,
you weren't designed for total suffering,
and most of all,
you weren't designed for doing it all on your own.
You and I were created to be beautiful, imperfect vessels
for carrying around the glory of God.

The good news in that
is that we don't have to think it all depends on us.

We're very good at that, aren't we,
making whatever it is all about us!
But it's not.
We don't have to BE God,
and we certainly shouldn't think that we can CONTAIN God.
We just have to CARRY God,
and make it clear that the credit
for whatever good we accomplish
belongs to that zany God of ours, not to us.
We have been shaped and formed by God,
in God's mysterious ways for God's good purposes,

and the good news is that we get to go along for the ride.

Friends of the Class of 2014,
each one of you has been through it these last four years.
Some of you may have followed a path like the one I took –
from two semesters as a music major
to one semester as a pre law until,
by the grace of God,
Dr. Street gave me a low C in the intro course,
and then coming to my senses graduating with a degree in – English!
As much as I came to love James Dickey and William Faulkner,
what was THAT about?
Dear ones, in four years plus or minus
you have changed majors at least once,
traveled the planet,
experienced major breakups or met the love of your life,
or both.
You did things you've never done before,
like sign up intentionally for an 8:00 class
or cheer for a team called the Kangaroos.
You came with a suitcase full of high hopes and good intentions.
Many of those were dashed early on,
upon the rocks of your freshman year or sophomore year.
Some of your grades were not worth writing home about.
But look at you now.
You didn't lose heart.
You have almost got that diploma on your hand.
You have made friends that you will keep the rest of your life.
But you need to know
that even if you didn't pledge anything
or get one recognition at the Honors Convocation,
you're going to be okay.
You have been shaped and formed by our creator.
It's your particular quirks and shortcomings
that set you apart from everyone else.

And your trials by fire
have given you a strength and sheen you never could have imagined
when you first set foot on this campus.

You have been afflicted in every way but not crushed,
perplexed but not driven to despair,
persecuted but not forsaken,
struck down but not destroyed,
bent but not broken,
always casting the glory of your Creator
in your unique, broken, shiny, colorful vessel.
God has shaped and refined you
for God's good purposes
that will only be evident in time as you continue the journey.
And as long as you can cling to that truth, dear ones,
you will never have the opportunity to lose heart.

ⁱ Seuss, Dr. *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* New York: Random House, 1990.

ⁱⁱ Brooks, David, "What Suffering Does." Op-Ed published in the New York Times April 7, 2014. Accessed electronically at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/08/opinion/brooks-what-suffering-does.html? r=0>