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Commencement Address  
Luther Seminary's 146<sup>th</sup> Commencement

Sunday May 17, 2015  
Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis

*Biblical Texts: Acts 1:3-17, 21-26; Psalm 40:1-8*

First, I need to remind all of us that today is a day for joy and gladness. We're here to celebrate. To laugh. To applaud. To relax. Graduates, you give the rest of us great joy. That's true for the faculty. For the staff. For the seminary's board of directors. For the school's donors and alums. Your faithfulness and hard work and vision make us joyful. We're joyful because in your effort and your willingness to enter your future we see signs of God's kingdom breaking in around us. And so, first and foremost, today we are celebrating God's faithfulness to all of us. You, the graduating class, remind all the rest of us that God has been good to us. We remember today, then, that God keeps promises to us; God breaks into our brokenness and claims us; God calls us to participate in the ongoing work of manifesting the kingdom of God.

Let me repeat that last one: God calls us to participate in the ongoing work of manifesting the reign of God. That's kind of wild. Next Sunday, on Pentecost, churches won't be observing the fact that Christians *receive* the Holy Spirit. We'll declare that the church, suffused by the Holy Spirit, becomes a place in the world where Christ is present. And active. And disruptive. God is involved in our work, our efforts, our lives. Amazing. It's a statement that reminds us that our joy is made more intense by the wonderful absurdity of all that we're doing here, celebrating God's choice to be among us... If you don't believe me that all of this is absurd, let me urge you to look once again at how all of us are dressed.

It's wild. And so the Acts of the Apostles is a good place for us to go for help in understanding it. If you don't like your theology with a measure of wildness mixed into it, then you probably don't like the book of Acts.

How do you think Matthias feels when they cast lots to make him the apostle who replaces Judas? Throwing dice, drawing stones—whatever exactly they did to make the choice. And you thought your “discernment process” was weird! Yet, Acts doesn't present casting lots as something we should copy—thank God. In the ancient worldview, there was nothing random or untheological going on. But the whole scene reminds me of how arbitrary all this can *feel*.

I mean—who's in charge of this? Congratulations, guys, we think either one of you could do the job. Now let's play dice!

Acts doesn't notice them, but I imagine, in that room of 120 people, that the sixty or so women are caucusing in the corner:

“Did you hear—they chose two men as the finalists?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Well, what were the criteria?”

“They said it had to be someone who has been with the group the *whole* time, from the baptism by John up to the ascension.”

“Oh, you mean like maybe Joanna, Susanna, or Mary Magdalene? So much for Peter following through on the agreed-upon plan.”

And then Mary, Jesus’ mother, says, “You want to talk about someone who was there from the beginning? You want to talk about “the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us”? I’ve got a few stories to tell about that...”

I don’t think Acts intends this decision to sound arbitrary, but it might feel that way to observers and participants. Why not choose Mary? Why not Barsabbas? How did we get here? Who decides where we’re going?

I imagine all of you graduates experience today with some kind of relief, but a lot of you also have a sense of how random or unpredictable all of this feels. I don’t know all of your stories, but I know enough of them to know that just a few changes here and there in your history, and today might never have happened.

It feels like the roll of the dice—what if you hadn’t taken the leap by selling your house and quitting your job? What if you hadn’t sought help for your illness? What if you had laughed it off when your pastor encouraged you to consider ministry? What if the soldiers in your house had found one of the knives in the kitchen? What if you had listened to the voices in your head who told you that you can’t do this?—can’t be a pastor. Can’t write a doctoral thesis. Can’t be a social worker. Can’t make a difference. Can’t do graduate studies in English.

It seems rather improbable that we all got here today, doesn’t it? Who among us today got here in a normal, rational way?

And there will be next steps. What will happen next, though, if you get a rejection letter? What if you’re called somewhere you’d rather not go? What if some bishop tells you, “Sorry, I don’t think that congregation is quite ready for someone like *you* to serve there?” It might take a while. How can it feel so out of control? Didn’t you bet your life on this calling? Why aren’t others treating it more seriously?

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With all these questions and this sense of WOW—it’s fortuitous that commencement lands here, in between ascension day last Thursday and Pentecost, which is coming next Sunday. Liturgically speaking, we’re situated in a space in our Easter memories where Jesus has made promises that haven’t yet come to fulfillment. Jesus has promised a role—a ministry—to his followers, and it all seems a little crazy, but they haven’t yet fully walked into it.

Maybe this wider story of promise, calling, and fulfillment helps us get a better handle on what today means for you. For *us*.

At yesterday's baccalaureate service, Dr. Lewis helped us think about the wildness or strangeness of Jesus' ascension. These people we meet in the reading from Acts have recently experienced their dead friend raised to new life, then he ascends into heaven. That's all.

Oh, but before Jesus did that last part, he gave his followers their marching orders. In the "house-of-nerds" that we call a seminary, we refer to this commissioning as a "vocation," or a "calling." Everyone—not just church leaders—has a vocation ... several vocations, really. Anyway, in Acts 1 Jesus has called his followers to be his witnesses in all the world. He hasn't *asked* them to be his witnesses. He's *told* them that's how it's going to be.

In Jesus, they've seen death overpowered. They've been given promises of God's kingdom. Promises of forgiveness extended to all. Their entire world has been turned upside down. It must seem like anything is possible. Then he tells them that they are going to play a part in all of the next steps.

They must be eager. They must be terrified (Matthew L. Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015], 5).

Don't minimize their importance as a part of God's intentions—these people in the first chapter of Acts are being prepared for great things. Read further into the book: These are the people who will be the ones to go out and make amazing claims. Like:

- "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."
- "God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life."
- "What God promised to our ancestors [God] has fulfilled for us...by raising Jesus."
- And "In [God] we live and move and have our being."

But don't stop at the end of Acts, because that's not the end of what this ragtag group of followers are waiting to do and to say. They will have other messages. They need to be ready for them. Down the road, through history, Jesus' followers will say:

- "We shall overcome."
- "Your sins are forgiven."
- "It gets better."
- "Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant."
- "Bring back our girls."
- "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."
- "Black lives matter."

These people still need to:

- preach the word,
- help rehabilitate the outcast,
- bury the dead,

- advocate for the immigrant who is locked behind fences and razor wire,
- insist that clean drinking water is a right, not a luxury,
- offer comfort to bullied adolescents,
- and tell abusers: No More.

These people are about to live out an immense, dangerous, wide-ranging calling. And they will do it. Just as people like all of you in this sanctuary and the people responsible for getting you here have been making these bold, world-changing announcements for generations.

The dust has barely begun to settle on the rumpled burial cloths left behind in Jesus' tomb, and the promises of what God will do in and through Jesus' followers are at hand.

There's urgency in the air. Jesus has got to send them now, right? He's going to pour out the Holy Spirit right now, isn't he?

No.

In this book, the first great *act* of the apostles is to walk back to Jerusalem and wait (Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, 7).

That's it? ... What about the Holy Spirit? Wait a week.

Maybe just one little sermon? Wait a week.

Miracles? Service? Wait a week. Wait a week.

Community-building? Wait a week.

"The *acts* of the apostles" is a really stupid name for this book. At least it is at this point in the story. They don't do much at the beginning, but wait.

That's how vocation is sometimes. But then, in time, vocation starts to emerge into something more active. You've all felt that—you've waited too. Sometimes it just happens; sometimes it's because you seize vocation by the tail and refuse to let go of it as it gallops along. Following Jesus isn't always about waiting. But it's not always about being active, either.

And often it's not fun, is it? Living into your vocation can be as scary as hell.

You're an audience who knows a thing or two about waiting. Your preparations and studies have been about waiting. Some of you are eager to get started on the next steps of your vocation—as soon as you can. Some of you have already begun in the last few months. Some of you have been in full-time ministry a long time, and you know that vocations change. They're dynamic, not static. We never wrestle them down.

So, don't hear me as romanticizing anything about waiting. Sure, waiting and preparing can strengthen you; but it can also weary you. The Class of 2015 came here with vocations—visions of their future ministry—whether those vocations were detailed or just vague ideas. But they know how scary it can be to wait on a vocation to emerge. Too often, vocation is like a 16-year-old child who borrowed the car for the night. Now he's missed curfew by two hours and counting. And so you wait—anxiously. Even angrily. Is my clear vocation ever going to come back? Will this kid come back the same as he left? Why is he doing this to you? You're going to kill vocation when it returns. You're going to hug it.

This takes courage. Leadership takes courage. Service takes courage. Church takes courage. The waiting we see in Acts 1 requires just as much courage as if Jesus had told all of his followers to go out immediately and change the world on their own.

I'm not talking just about the people with the good seats wearing the black robes. I'm thinking about you, their families and friends, too. Kids—*are you still awake?* Kids, your parents may ask you to move to a new place. They're going to ask you to trust. To be brave and to have faith. You have vocations, too.

I hope all of you in this sanctuary and those of you listening online get some time to meet a few of these graduates. Some of them have spent very long stretches of time away from their families to follow their vocation. Some of them left successful careers. Some have been waiting a long time to get here. Some never grabbed this new vocation by the tail but have been hunted by a vocation, like it was some crazed career tribute from *The Hunger Games*. Other graduates have had to walk through violence or endure the suspicion of their own governments and neighbors.

So, I don't know that how God got you here to this point, to this commencement, to this commissioning, was *arbitrary*. In the end, though, it's marvelous.

Maybe *how* each of you came to this point is, finally, less important than *why* you got here.

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Simone Weil, the early-twentieth-century French activist and Christian mystic, wrote a marvelous little essay called “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God.” In this essay, she defines prayer as *attention*. She says, prayer is “the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God” (Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, [New York: Perennial, 2001], 57). Learning how to pay attention teaches you how to pray, because paying attention is about opening yourself to someone or something else, waiting to be filled by it, waiting to encounter it for what it is. To pray is to meet God.

Weil says that even school exercises help us learn to pray, because they teach us to pay attention. She writes that “Every school exercise,” like studying geometry or practicing how to write letters correctly, “is like a sacrament,” because, as she puts it: in these exercises “there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 63). It has to come *to* us.

Then, as schoolwork trains us in what it's like to pay attention to God, Weil contends we also learn how to pay attention to our neighbors who suffer. These are the ones we would miss, if we weren't alert.

You graduating students know what this training can feel like. Come on, some of you had to learn Hebrew verb forms. Or memorize a catechism. Or write a methodological overview section for your thesis. Or you read all those pages and then wondered why everyone else in your online forum seemed to have missed all the things you thought were vital. Even if you did these academic tasks wrongly, or made mistakes, or hated it, still you learned to open yourself up to knowledge. Even if today you can't remember whether Gregory of Nyssa was a Cappadocian or a Capuchin, in studying the strange terrain of the church's history you learned how to open yourself to new practices. To encounter another. To open yourself to God. To a calling. To a neighbor.

If all has gone as planned, then the seminary, and all of its many partners, have taught you one vital thing: how to pay attention. Or how to pay attention better. *That, my friends, is finally the secret to theological education—and the secret to Christian leadership: learn how to pay attention.*

Attentiveness is love's surest expression.

Pay attention to God, yes. But in doing so you will learn to pay attention to the sufferer and to the world. Your paying attention to others isn't for show or to insert yourself in self-aggrandizing ways. It's a careful listening, letting truth come to you—letting you hear and see what the kingdom of God has taught you to hear and see.

By paying attention—to your neighbor in need, to God—you will become a more attentive participant in the ongoing conversations—the life-changing conversations—between the word of God and the people of God.

One last time, from Simone Weil: “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them” (Weil, *Waiting for God*, 62).

She might have learned this from the first chapter of Acts.

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Waiting reminds us of our dependence on God and the limitations of our ability to see and know God. Waiting's not just sitting around and contemplating. You've *been* waiting. There's more to be done.

Waiting on vocation, or waiting to make a choice or to put a plan into action often proves frustrating, because it feels like indecision, weakness, or wasted time. *Once you commit yourself to waiting, how do you know when it's time to stop?* The beginning chapter of Acts suggests that *you'll know*, as long as you and those with you remain attentive and anticipant as you wait (Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, 7–8).

Thank you, Class of 2015, from me and my faculty colleagues, for the privilege of waiting and being attentive with you these last few years. Moreover, thanks be to God, for working among you.

May God bless the world in the days and years to come through your energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.

And be sure to come back every now and then to let us know what's been happening next.