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Opening Convocation: 2006-2007, "Embracing The Christian Story, While at the Same Time..."

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Embracing The Christian Story, While At The Same Time . . .

Opening Convocation Address

Philip W. Eaton, President

September 26, 2006

We have had such a wonderful time gathering in planning retreats, student leadership conferences, orientation for new students and parents. Wow, I sense we are off to a great start. But we must also recognize this morning that we have not had a chance to welcome our returning students. And so I welcome you all back to campus. And thank you all for being here this morning.

I would love to just talk with you this morning about some things that are on my heart and rumbling around my head. When I put this robe on and place this medallion around my neck, I feel I've got to say something heavy and profound. But I would just like to chat with you for a few minutes. I've had so many speeches in the last few days—far too many. As Rob Wall said at church Sunday, “you've got to be running out of material.” And it's true.

But I've got some things I want to say, some things I care about deeply. I wish we were sitting around a table at the moment for good conversation and exchange on these ideas. All of this requires good conversation. I need your wisdom.

For those of you who attended the State of the University Address, you know that I want to lift up three questions for us to ponder this year. • How can we learn to gather as a community more effectively? • How can we be even more intentional about what it means to be global at Seattle Pacific? • How can we place the biblical text at the center of who we are?

These are not random questions for me. They come out of a huge amount of study and reflection and writing. What I want to do this morning is take us a few more steps in our thinking about the first and third of these questions. The question on global education I will initiate at a later time.

Now, listen, just relax. I have a huge number of other things on my list of goals too. I am not going to be obsessed with these questions. I have no intentions of putting a guilt trip on anyone about attending chapel and the big gatherings. I would love to see us all there, but who knows what will happen. I don't know exactly where we are headed with the notion of the biblical text at our center either, but I would like to see us reflect on that challenge. I think it is hugely important.

One beautiful summer evening after work in August, I was rushing down to the Pike Place Market to get a newspaper and pick up some peaches. I was scurrying along, as I usually do, and I came up on two young guys ambling down the street, pants pulled way down around the hips, a bit of a scuffle in their step, you know the cool shuffle, the hip shuffle. And I looked up at the t-shirt one of them was wearing and it said “What's the hurry?”

And, I thought “good question.” Well, I've got a lot of things to do, things on my mind, things on the plate. “What's the hurry” is not an easy question for me.

I try to go out very early every morning for a brisk walk to stay in some semblance of shape. On Friday morning this last week, right in the middle of our orientation time for new students, with so much yet to happen that day, I was bustling along thinking about the next speeches and all of the detail for the day ahead. At about Third and Seneca, I was heading down the hill to finish my walk hit my closest Starbucks for a latte, and

without a car or bus in sight, at 6 o'clock in the morning, I crossed the intersection on a red light, as I usually do.

Suddenly, when I was right in the middle of the intersection, out of the shadows came a motorcycle with siren blaring and lights ablaze. Then came the amplified speaker: "please stand at the side of the street." I wanted to say, hey, I just passed any number of folks out here who need your help more than I do. As the officer pulled his reading glasses, of all things, out of a neat little pocket in his motorcycle, I began to try to talk my way out of this unfortunate situation. I said, "well, officer, you know, everyone does it." He just kept writing. I switched tactics a bit and said, "officer, I am so grateful for all you do to keep our city safe." I even said "God bless you." He just kept writing.

You can't believe how impatient I felt. And embarrassed. I was looking around for a Falcon photographer. This can't be. I've got things to do. I've got to get back and write speeches. You don't understand, officer. But here I was, forced from here on out to stand for red lights at 6 a.m. when there is no traffic!

What's the hurry, my friendly officer seemed to be asking me. He even took a call on his cell phone, which I swear was personal. What's the hurry?

I'm asking myself that question this year? Is it possible for me actually to pause in the week and attend chapel? We've worked very hard to make these services focused and worshipful in new ways. We've asked Stephen Newby and the Gospel Choir and the student worship team to lift the roof off. We're asking Professor Rob Wall to lead us in a series on how to read the Scriptures. And Professor Susan Gallagher. And we've invited some great speakers for the President's Symposia, Richard Hays and George Weigel, and for the Day of Common Learning we have Joel Carpenter. Dr. John Perkins will join us again.

I hope we begin to feel that these gathering times are so good and so compelling that these are the places to be. Perhaps I can make it. What's the hurry anyway?

But here's a big assumption that drives my thoughts on this goal to gather. I believe the signature of embracing the Christian story is central to our identity as a Christian university. I have chosen that language carefully. The challenge is to learn how to embrace and trust in a culture that knows nothing but suspicion and caution and even cynicism. Can we truly embrace our story? And it is a story we embrace, a story of what is true and good and beautiful, in a culture of violently competing stories.

But here's the point: if we are going to embrace the Christian story as one of our signatures, I believe we must gather around the holy text that tells that story. We call it becoming biblically and theologically educated. Does that make sense to you? We have to gather around the text and listen to its sounds. We have to know the stories within the story. We have to discuss what it means. We have to debate its implications for our lives. We have to grow the theological tools that allow us to best understand the story. We have to worship with its sounds ringing in our ears. Don't you think?

In Chaim Potok's wonderful novel *The Gift of Asher Lev*, the main character Asher is both pulled and repelled by the Hasidic Jewish community of his family and his childhood. The people are good to him. They live by the values of strong family and deep community. Most of all they are a people "where the fire of Torah burns" within them. But as an artist, Asher knows he might be suffocated by this huge embrace.

But the sacred text is at the center of who these people are as Jews. Toward the end of the novel, there is an incredible scene, when on an ordinary Sabbath evening, Asher and his son Avrumel head to the synagogue for the Sabbath service. At one point the music begins, and the holy text is brought out onto the floor where all the men are gathered. Suddenly, someone hands the scroll to Asher, and he begins to dance. "I held the scroll," he says, "as something precious to me, a living being with whose soul I was forever bound, this Sacred Scroll, this Word, this Fire of God, this Source for my own

creation, this velvet-encased Fountain of All Life which I now clasped in a passionate embrace. I dance with the Torah for a long time, following the line of dancers through the steamy air of the synagogue and out into the chill tumultuous street and back into the synagogue and then reluctantly yielding the scroll to a huge dark-bearded man, who hungrily scooped it up and swept away with it in his arms.” (p.362)

This is the Jewish love for Torah. The text is everything to them, surrounded as they are by a very hostile secular city. It is their story. It defines who they are. Without it they are nothing, and they know that. It is their guide. In this sacred writing they find the voice of God, clear commandments on how to live. They find their blessing and their promise. It is the key to their connection to God.

Can you imagine such a dance of joy and love for the holy text in our Protestant gatherings? Now trust me, we are not going to start dancing like this. When Stephen Newby tries to get us to learn new words and sway from side to side and clap our hands—all at the same time—I can’t pull it off. I am dancing challenged.

But the point is, can I ever imagine myself having such respect and love for the text? Can I imagine myself in such wholehearted embrace of the text of my faith?

Our culture does not give us the tools of embrace. The New Testament scholar Richard Hays, who will be with us for the President’s Symposia in November, says this: “Living as we do on this side of the Enlightenment, we cannot escape the intellectual impact of the great ‘masters of suspicion’: Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, and more recently Foucault. . . . These thinkers have sought to demystify language and to expose the ways in which our linguistic and cultural systems are constructed by ideologies that further the interests of those who hold power.”

Hays goes on to say that “the Bible [itself] has not been exempt from such suspicious scrutiny.”

You may have seen the report this summer that Reed College students are proud to be ranked #1 in the nation as students who don’t think about God. One professor says our students at Reed are taught to question, to be suspicious. That’s their signature. That’s an end of education, this posture of suspicion. And we must prize that signature too. But can we ever venture beyond the posture of suspicion and questioning, the primary marks of our culture, to finally come to a place of embrace and trust?

As the wonderfully-elegant and always-provocative Stanley Fish says, the modern university wholeheartedly commits itself to a profound and pervasive notion of unfettered neutrality, “a continual pushing away of orthodoxies” of any sort. The ideal here is a mind that “is open to all thoughts and closed to none,” a mind that is never “settled,” never committed, never embracing, and any settling-in around “an idea or a value [or a story] is a sign of cognitive and moral infirmity.”

Nietzsche too felt the mind could never be settled, should always be suspicious, should believe ultimately in nothing. He called himself the “man of renunciation,” renouncing any story that had been handed down through tradition and community. Like the Reed students, Nietzsche felt we had in fact banished God from culture, from our minds, from our discourse. But then he goes on to paint a picture of what it is like to live a life of utter suspicion: “You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you deny yourself any stopping before ultimate wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power. . . . there is no avenger for you, no eventual improver; there is no reason any more in what happens, no love of what will happen to you; no resting place is any longer open to your heart. . . .”

This is precisely why we must learn to embrace our Christian story. This is why we must gather together. This is why we must place the sacred text of our story right in the middle of our gathering. This is why we must learn to trust and embrace.

As you know from my comments over the last few weeks, I am reflecting on that marvelous text in Romans 12 throughout the year. My thanks to Professor Wall who read this text so beautifully this morning. I think Paul is presenting to us just this choice for our community. On the one hand, there are the patterns of the culture: suspicion, caution, a cynical, never-settling of the mind. On the other, because of the mercies of God, he calls us to embrace and to trust. The latter is nothing less than transformation, the continual renewing of the mind, ultimately the discovery and discernment of our story of what is good and true and beautiful for all the world.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by [because of] the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual [reasonable] worship. Do not be conformed to [the patterns of] this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

I hope we recognize that this transformation is not just for us as individuals. In Paul it is almost never just personal. The rest of the chapter lays out an outline of what a community looks like that is shaped by people who are capable of embrace. Some of the advice is startling. For example, he says don't think too highly of yourselves. Recognize the gifts of others. Be unified in Christian community—let love show itself. Live in agreement. Let hope keep you joyful.

Listen, none of this is just how we do chapel. Nor is it about whether we can make it on Tuesday mornings, though I hope we can. Let's think hard this coming year on how to embrace, how to embrace each other, how to embrace our holy text, our story.

And remember, as my friends downtown like to say, “What's the hurry?” If it's that big a deal, perhaps we can find the time.

