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Opening Convocation: 2005-2006, "What We Need Now Is a Conversion of the Imagination"

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What We Need Now Is A Conversion of the Imagination

Opening Convocation Address

Philip W. Eaton, President

September 27, 2005

I want to welcome you to the official opening of the academic year 2005-2006. I have been welcoming people all over the place. I am just about welcomed out. I had to speak nine times in over these last two weeks, and I will guarantee you one thing: no one can say something totally new nine times in such a short period of time.

In any case, I'm ready to go, ready and eager for the real work ahead. And I feel that same eagerness in this room this morning.

Last week at the State of the University Address, I spoke about the strong sense of momentum I feel at this great university. I think we are on a roll.

But all of that momentum is really focused right here. This ceremony celebrates our commitment to learning. All of the plans we have laid for the future of this institution are about the learning of our students, what our graduates will have learned, the learning of our faculty—and then, of course, what we do with that learning. That's what I want to talk about at this convocation. What do we do with all of our learning?

Two weeks ago I was involved in a fairly intense discussion with a group of very smart people about this question. I was searching for ways to describe our distinctive kind of education, our signatures. And I was asking this question: can a university change the world? Should that really be the purpose of learning, the mission, of a great university?

And one of the participants, a person I respect a great deal, said, "you know, if I am a parent or a prospective student, I am not sure I really care whether a university can change the world. I want to know that I am going to get the best education my money can buy."

That statement threw me off balance. Maybe we shouldn't care so much about changing the world. Maybe we should just hunker down and be a school. Sometimes I say to myself: why don't you just lighten up a bit? My wife tells me that. My cabinet tells me that; well, not very directly, but they do.

Maybe the big idea for any university is for students to learn the skills and competencies to earn a good living. That does happen, you know, with a college education, and that is a good and worthy goal.

But is that enough? On Sunday in the *NY Times*, David Brooks had a scorching indictment of higher education in this country today. "Especially in these days after Katrina," he said, "everybody laments poverty and inequality." And of course we certainly do. Those pictures of displaced folks in New Orleans, mostly black and mostly poor, will become indelible images for us in the years ahead. Something is broken, we find ourselves muttering. "But what are you doing about it?" Brooks asks. "For example, let's say you work at a university or a college. You are a cog in one of the great inequality producing machines this country has known. What are you doing to change that?"

Holy mackerel, I said to myself, this is getting personal. He is aiming his indictment straight at me, aiming right at the heart of what we are doing here at SPU.

He goes on to talk about social and cultural and economic stratification that is setting in

between those with a college degree and those without. And so I ask us this morning: what are we doing here at SPU to change those horrifying images of poverty and inequality? Should that be a question on our plates?

Here's what I think: the cultural, social, economic, religious, and global shifts that are taking place in our world today are seismic, and that must change the way we do education. We want to be a place that knows and understands what's going on in the world. I have said it before: we cannot afford to live in an ivory tower. We cannot withdraw into the comfort and safety of an intellectual ghetto. We cannot indulge in Christian separatism.

In another article two weeks ago, David Brooks says that "it's already clear this will be known as the grueling decade, the Hobbesian decade. Americans have had to acknowledge dark realities that it is not in our nature to readily acknowledge: the thin veneer of civilization, the elemental violence in human nature, the lurking ferocity of the environment, the limitations on what we can plan and know, the cumbersome reactions of bureaucracies, the uncertain progress good makes over evil."

The British novelist Ian McEwen says that we live in a world of "unbearable complexity." To be sure. And the question I am grappling with is this: how can a Christian university have something to say about all of this?

I read Cormac McCarthy's new novel this summer called *No Country For Old Men*. This is a frightening, haunting novel set on the borderlands between Mexico and Texas, a territory so familiar to McCarthy. This is the land where international drug wars take place and where drug lords inflict unimaginable violence on one another and on the innocent standing by.

One old sheriff says, "I just have the feelin we're looking at somethin we really aint never even seen before."

Later in the novel another sheriff says, "I thought I'd never seen a person like that and it got me to wondering if maybe he was some new kind."

Now here's my deepest conviction in all of this: we have to have something to say about this disturbing world, don't we? We have to look right into the heart of all this profound and confusing change, and say something. We have to craft a unique kind of learning that ventures a response that is meaningful and helpful. Don't you think?

So how does a university respond to such a changed world? I have been reading the collected works of one of the most important poets of the 20th Century. His name is Czeslaw Milosz, and he died just a year ago. He was Polish American and suffered under the brutal occupation of his country, first by the Nazis and then by the Soviets. To the end, he held on to his tentative, restless commitment to the Christian church and to the mystery of faith.

He says this about his calling as a poet: right in the midst of brutal occupation and oppression, foolish as it might seem to others, "I wrote idyllic verses . . . in the very center of what was taking place . . . and not by any means out of ignorance. . . . Gentle verses written in the midst of horror declare themselves for life." "The resistance of tiny kernels of good, to which no one grants the power of causing far-reaching consequences, is entirely mysterious. . . ."

What does it mean for us to write gentle verses into a disturbing, confusing, complex, and changing world? What does it mean for a Christian university to share the mystery of news that profoundly good? And how do we do that?

Several summers ago I was studying 1 Corinthians, and I stumbled into the first two verses of that great book in a way that changed my life. My sense of calling took on sharper focus. As clause stacks upon clause, you get this sense of exhilaration, this

sense of momentum, this sense of vision that the gospel of Jesus just may be exploding all over the world. I was stunned with the excitement of it all.

Paul's life, of course, was utterly transformed when Jesus assaulted him on the road to Damascus. As it got up off the ground, and finally cleared his eyes, he understood, in profoundly new ways, that this Jewish Jesus was for all the world!

What happened for Paul was nothing less than a conversion of the imagination, to use Richard Hays language. His mind, his imagination, was blown open with the possibilities. From its deep Jewish roots, the Christian story all of a sudden made sense. Our task now, empowered by God's covenant with Abraham, that marvelous blessing to a chosen few, was to make sure that all of God's children everywhere have the chance to flourish.

But then, as this marvelous book continues to unfold, something else happens. Paul suddenly begins to talk about community formation. And you get the sense that Paul has discovered that changing the world is not possible without a clear Christian identity that is shaped in community. What does it mean to be a Christian community in this pagan, secular, pluralist world?

And then he literally shouts at this scruffy, little group of Christians: stop fighting with one another. If we are going to change the world, we've got to come together. Don't you see how revolutionary it can be to gather in Christian community? And then he makes one more shift as he zeros in on what really matters. The only way for Christians to live in community in the long run, the only way you are going to have anything really good to offer the world, is to come together at the foot of the cross.

Say what? What in the world do you mean, Paul? That cross is foolishness to the Greeks and an outright scandal to the Jews. What do you mean the cross has something profoundly good to offer? That's like saying that gentle verses have power in the face of huge forces we don't understand.

Something utterly mysterious going on here.

This summer Sharon and I visited the great Hollywood Presbyterian Church, where two of our kids attend. This church has a wonderful legacy of audaciously thriving right in the heart of Hollywood. This was the home of the legendary Henrietta Meers, sometimes known as the mother of Sunday School, an extraordinary Bible teacher and mentor to so many future leaders in the church.

Hollywood Pres is deeply hurting right now, splintered and split over some very serious management issues. People are fighting and angry. The church is highly politicized; their congregational meetings are nasty, vicious. People have left the church.

And on the Sunday that Sharon and I visited, Lloyd Olgivie returned to the pulpit as a guest preacher. If you have ever heard Lloyd preach, you will never forget: his voice is like God's voice. Lloyd was pastor there for many, many years and went on to become the Chaplain of the U. S. Senate. By the way, Lloyd received an honorary doctorate from Seattle Pacific, and each time I see him, he tells me he is an alum.

In any case, when Lloyd stood up to speak, the congregation jumped to their feet in applause. They yearned for a healer. They wanted desperately to come together. Maybe their old pastor could help.

Would he enter into the fray of their politics? As Lloyd began his sermon, he told a story about the day they were erecting a huge stone cross on top of the church. The cranes arrived and the big cross was hoisted to the pinnacle of the church and set firmly down. Since that day, Lloyd said, he has imagined that this great church gathers each week right here under the cross.

And this is a moment, he said, in the life of this church, to come to the foot of the cross. With all of our anger and bitterness and hurt, our confusion and our sense of betrayal, let us bring it all and lay it at the foot of the cross. Because only there will we know healing and unity again.

Maybe this has something to do with our ultimate uniqueness at Seattle Pacific. Can a university change the world? Not without Christian community. Not without clear Christian identity. Well, where does that come from? Well maybe it all comes from the mysterious power of the cross of Jesus sitting right in the center of our community. I'm not sure what all of this means, but I think it is hugely important.

I am in very deep waters theologically here, but I think the cross calls us to humility and gratitude in all that we do. You mean you can change the world with humility and gratitude? Now, there's a bit of foolishness.

I think I am beginning to see that our posture has to be one of humility, our hearts must be filled with gratitude. It's utterly mysterious, like gentle verses, but it's true.

Throughout this year, I ask you to think with me on this word, this word of the cross, so full of surprising power. Help me to understand what it means. Help me understand what it means to carry on the work of this great university with humility and gratitude. And let us pray for nothing less than a conversion of the imagination. Perhaps this is the way, through humility and gratitude, those marks of the cross of Jesus, that we can speak into this disturbing and confusing world.

Can a university change the world? Maybe so.

