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Opening Convocation: 2000-2001, "Bear Witness to Hope"

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Bear Witness To Hope

The President's Address, Opening Convocation
September 26, 2000

Even though I grew up in Arizona, or maybe because of that, I love the seasons. Isn't it great to feel a nip of fall in the air? Somehow there is a sense of new beginnings here with this gorgeous fall weather. We can start fresh, set new goals, begin again.

I did some of that kind of thinking over the summer. Who am I, and just what are my gifts, and what are my weaknesses, and where am I going in the days and years ahead? How can I be most effective, and how will I know when I have stopped being effective?

Those are the questions of calling. What does it mean to be called instead of just simply making choices about life? What is a calling?

We live with the notion most often, in this highly individualistic world of ours, that life is like a cafeteria: there are lots of choices, and all we have to do is listen to our hunger, and make a choice. Pizza today, burgers tomorrow, tacos the next day. Gwinn is like that. What am I hungry for today?

But discovering and rediscovering our sense of calling is not best described as a cafeteria. Listening to our hunger is only a part of the story. Reflecting on calling is to connect our hunger, our gifts, our desires, and our dreams to something much bigger.

I discovered this summer in the 6th chapter of John a very fresh way to think about what it means to be called. This is the story where Jesus fed the five thousand. Five thousand people, with hungry bellies and restless hearts, gathered at the feet of Jesus. And the disciples began fussing and murmuring: what are we going to do? We don't have enough food to feed these people. Our resources are quite meager. All we have is these puny little loaves of bread and a couple of fish. My word, five thousand people.

And Jesus steps into this moment of hunger and restlessness and does something absolutely mind-boggling. He says bring me the five loaves and the two fish. And as he begins to break the bread he opens up to his disciples and to the hungry crowd and to a hungry world a marvelous banquet of plenty. Hunger is satisfied. Hearts are changed. Minds are transformed. And in that moment of feeding, the world is no longer the same.

Jesus took those pitiful resources and transformed them, exploded them, into a feast. And John says, over and over again, in wonder and amazement, welcome to a feast. Bring your small gifts to Jesus and he will make something really big of them. Now there's an angle on what it means to be called.

In the ensuing conversation, the disciples asked Jesus this important question: so Jesus, "how can we be sure that our work will be the work of God"? That's the important question. That's the question of calling, isn't it? Not just, what is my desire, what am I hungry for at life's cafeteria line, but what does it mean to align my gifts, small as they are, with God's work, with God's extraordinary grace and love, with God's flourishing?

In light of these reflections on calling here are the questions I have been asking myself: how can I bear witness to the hope that is found in Jesus Christ?

Now listen to this—here is the other thing I discovered about my calling this summer. In order to contribute, in whatever small way, to making the world a place where all of God's children can flourish, I believe it is my calling, and it is

our calling as a Christian university, to model, support, cultivate, and nourish the life of the mind. I think, as I seek to bring hope in the world, it is my calling to lift up and support the Christian intellectuals and artists in this room and beyond.

I have come to believe more deeply than ever before, that in order to be world-changers, we must be culture-shapers, and in order to be culture-shapers we must cultivate the life of the mind and the life of the imagination. We must be thoughtful Christians, thinking Christians. That's the premise of my address this morning.

I just put together an amazing list of scholarly and intellectual and artistic activity that is going on all across our campus. It is amazing. Talk about engaging the culture-our people are getting it done. The next time an Alan Wolfe writes an article in Atlantic on the evangelical mind, I want to see SPU in the mix.

And let me add this note. It is not just our faculty I am talking about. Whatever you end up doing in your life, whatever your specific calling turns out to be, and whatever your role is at SPU, be a thinker, open yourself to the great literature of all time, be conversant with philosophy and theology and poetry and art, learn to be a person of ideas, a person of wisdom. Read *Image*. Go hear Randy Maddox and others lectures on our campus. Think on the issues of the day. Rediscover your own gifts as a thinking Christian. Stretch yourself to read, study, and reflect.

I am convinced that the Christian intellectual and artist have been shoved to the sidelines in the evangelical church for at least this last century. This is not a pretty story. There is plenty of blame to spread around for why this has happened. The intellectual community must share some of the blame, indulging at times in arrogance, intimidation, and snobbery, honing such refined skills to preach to the choir of their own disciplines alone, sometimes accommodating to secular culture and losing a distinctive voice. And then of course some of the blame lies with the fear in the broader church community, a fear of ideas, a fear of fresh thinking for our times, a fear of pushing some of the boundaries that seem so sacred, a fear really of engaging the culture. Separatism has seemed so comfortable.

But now is the time, folks, as we stand at a crossroads where one culture is dying and another groaning to be born, now is the time to lift up once again the clear thinking, the sure wisdom, the fresh imagination of our Christian intellectuals, writers, and artists as perhaps the critical change-agents, the fundamental culture-shapers, for our world to come. And now is the time for the Christian intellectual and artist to seek a new posture of relevance and helpfulness, to move in from the margins, to stop preaching to the choir alone, to become culture-shapers for the goodness and wholeness of God's flourishing grace.

I pledge to you that I will do everything I can to support in new kinds of ways the Christian intellectual and artist at SPU and beyond. Help me know the ways.

Let me tell you about a hero I discovered this summer. I have been deeply impacted by the life and teaching of a real world-changer, a real culture-shaper, one of the great figures of the 20th Century, Pope John Paul II. What a powerful example of engaging the culture/changing the world for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I know I take some risks here. How can I lift up John Paul II when I haven't come close to mastering John Wesley, Karl Barth, even Dallas Willard, or so many others in the Protestant evangelical world? Trust me, I am fiercely Protestant, but all I can say is that I have been touched by the witness of this Christian leader.

I have been touched in part because the Pope understands so profoundly that in order to change the world, in order to bring the light of Jesus Christ into the world, we must know how to engage the culture. The Pope has thought deeply about the crisis of modernity, that in fact in all of the horrors of the twentieth century a profoundly biblical notion of what it means to be human has been diminished.

And the Pope has come to the conclusion that the desperate need for change will not come through politics, nor will change come through economics, as both the Marxist and the Capitalist have tried to convince us in the 20th Century, nor will change come, God help us, through tanks and missiles. No, real change will come through culture and culture is most profoundly shaped by religious truth and in order to engage the culture with truth we better be thinking people. That's what the life and work of this pope says to me.

In October of 1978 the College of Cardinals met in Rome to select a new Pope for the Catholic Church. We don't know a lot about their deliberations as they gathered in strict seclusion to select a leader for this one billion member congregation. But Bishop Karol Wojtyla from Poland was emerging as a candidate this time around. In the course of the deliberations, when one of Wojtyla's Polish colleagues was asked whether he would make a good pope, that colleague responded, "Oh, no, I don't think so. He's just a poet."

I love it. I thought about using that line as the title for this address. I love the irony here. Indeed, Karol Wojtyla is a poet and an intellectual. He is a philosopher by training and scholarly accomplishment. He is a theologian. He has written a play, of all things, and lots of poetry.

And here is the wonderful point: it is a poet who has become a man of the century, in my opinion, a man who perhaps more than any other human being stemmed the tide of communism, a man who has brought the hope of Christ to millions around the world. It is a poet who understands modernism, that culture of the self, ultimately a culture of death, and speaks boldly and courageously of the mystery of Jesus Christ as the transforming power for a new culture of life. Think of it-a poet, an intellectual, a philosopher, a world-changer!

Let me tell you a little about Karol Wojtyla. He is Polish to the core, the first Pole to have ever become Pope. The culture of his country has been shaped by Christian and Catholic faith and teaching for over a thousand years. As a very young man he lived through Nazi occupation in Poland. He had to bear witness to unspeakable horror as some of his young Jewish classmates, some of his cherished friends, were taken off to the gas chambers of the Nazi holocaust. Some have criticized the Pope that perhaps, as a young man, he did not resist enough during this period. As I read the life of this deeply thoughtful man, this experience has haunted his imagination and shaped his vision for a new world.

Never again, the Pope says through his life and his teachings, never again should we allow the dehumanizing forces of totalitarian brutality to tear down human dignity in this way. Never again, quite precisely because each person is created in the image of God. More than any other Christian leader the Pope has accomplished so much to breach the gap between Jews and Christians that has existed for 2000 years.

As soon as Nazi power unraveled in Poland and all over Europe, the Stalinist forces from Russia moved in from the East, and Karol Wojtyla and the people of Poland had to endure this new regime of lies, new brutality, and mind-numbing inefficiency. It is as if these regimes of death, grounded on the philosophy of modernity, could airbrush from history the shaping of culture by the Church for over a thousand years. And so Wojtyla and his friends went underground, at least for all appearances. What they really did underground was to build a strong philosophy of cultural resistance in the name of Christ. This is not the resistance of force or political maneuvering or head-on confrontation in the streets, but the resistance of teaching, the resistance of writing plays and poems, the resistance of worshiping and praying, the resistance of lifting up the great mystery of Jesus Christ and in so doing empowering people with their own sense of dignity as creatures made in the image of God. This is called engaging the culture.

And it is not just Nazi horror or communist brutality against which the battle looms on. It is devastating poverty and the hunger all over the world. It is the numbing, seemingly intractable, racial, ethnic, national, and religious violence

flaring out all over the world. It is now the secular, materialist, relativist, individualist culture which is the enemy of human dignity.

We too are in such a battle, the Pope continues to teach, but a battle for the soul, a battle for the heart and for the mind. If we are to thrive, if God's children are to flourish, then we must believe, as Karol Wojtyla believes, that resistance is cultural resistance, not only in times of vulgar totalitarian brutality, but in our own coarse time of self-centeredness.

And so finally let me return to the answer Jesus gave to the disciples question of calling. When they asked him, how is it that our work can be aligned to God's work, here is the surprising answer that Jesus gives: believe in the one, Jesus says, whom God has sent. Believe in the bread of life, and you will want to feed the hungry. Believe in Jesus, and then your work will be aligned to God's purpose in the world. Believe in transformed plenty, and you will bring hope through your work. Believe that Jesus serves a feast. Believe that Jesus can take my meager gifts and do something with them far beyond what I could ever dream or imagine.

Well these are the things I invite you to consider in this coming year. These things are very important to me, and I want you to listen carefully.

- As you consider your calling, as you renew your calling, think hard how the life of the mind, the renewing your mind, figures into that calling. Be a thinker. Support our intellectuals, as I intend to do, in this community and beyond. Be thoughtful. Study, read, and reflect no matter what you end up doing with your life, no matter what contribution you make in your role at Seattle Pacific.
- And then, secondly, consider this: meditate with me, in this coming year, on the profound mystery of Jesus Christ. Consider the mystery that has transformed the lives of some two billion people all over the world. Consider that in believing you align yourself to God's work.

Let me add this: I want to respect those of you who are not Christians in our SPU community, those of no faith, and those of other faiths. I want to respect where each one of you is in the pilgrimage of faith. One of the things I must discover much better is how to bear witness to the hope of Christ in a pluralist world. I am working hard on that.

Rest assured, we will impose nothing on you. But rest assured as well that we will invite each one of you to consider the transforming gift of Jesus Christ. As we all think about our calling, just think what Jesus might do with our meager gifts.

- And then finally, consider how you may bear witness to hope. Hope is the way things are, you know. We cannot bear witness to hopelessness. We cannot, for example, sow seeds of dissension in this place. That brings hopelessness. We cannot be dishonest with each other. That brings hopelessness. Don't bear witness to despair, or dissension, or to me-centeredness, or hurtfulness, but bear witness to the hope. Let's be a place where hope abounds.

These three go together. Consider the life of the mind as a part of your calling. Meditate with me on the profound mystery of Jesus Christ. And then bear witness to hope, here in our SPU community and to the far reaches of the earth. If we can do these things, God will take our meager offerings, our little gifts, and transform them into a life-giving feast of plenty.

Thank you very much.

