

June 1, 2014
Graduation Sunday 2014
Facing an Uncertain Future
Jeremiah 29:10-14

Opening words: This Sunday at Western Reserve is graduation Sunday. Graduation is more than a piece of paper with official-looking signatures. It is more than just mastering a certain amount of information. It is really the opening of a door to another chapter in your life. This morning we recognize seven graduates from our congregation, five from high school and two from college. We are proud of each one of you and are confident of your future success. Before I preach this morning I want to read those names to you.

Jeffrey Bishop (Austintown Fitch High School)
Christopher Halley (Canfield High School)
Holly King (Boardman High School)
Briton Parry (Canfield High School)
Rachel Williamson (Austintown Fitch High School)
Matthew Franklin (Ohio University)
Andrew Halley (Ringling College)

Will you please pray with me?

Jeremiah 29:10-14 This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

Years ago, before the Civil War threatened to rip our country apart, before Columbus discovered a New World, before Jesus hung on the cross for the salvation of the world, there was a man who spoke on behalf of God. His name means "the Lord exalts" or "the Lord establishes." However, we simply call him Jeremiah. His story is found in the Old Testament book that contains his name. In those 52 chapters, he does not hide his personal struggles. He states them clearly. He was crippled with self-doubt and self-criticism. He needed to be filled with self-confidence because that was what his country needed. Judah was on a downward spiral. They were nothing more than a pawn in their little corner of the world. The super powers of their world, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, were dividing up the land. Judah was facing an uncertain future.

That is why the words from the twenty-ninth chapter of this book must have stood out. Jeremiah was trying to calm their raw nerves. Verse eleven must have acted as a cooling ointment on their open wounds. Speaking for God, he says:

For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Those are powerful words because he is reminding the people that they are not forgotten. In spite of their uncertain future, they are still loved by God. In spite of their uncertain future, God had a plan for them. In spite of their uncertain future, God had a future for them. There was only one problem with all of that. God's plan for them was a great secret to them. They were facing an uncertain future and didn't know how to answer the question, "what are you going to do with the rest of your life?" It is not just a story about the ancient Hebrews.

It is a story for all of us who are facing an uncertain future. It is a piece of scripture for this year's graduating class. You know the scene. It is played out annually. It is the first Sunday in June. Generally, it is scheduled the Sunday before graduation. The young faces gather for a congratulatory breakfast with the pastor. It is more than a meal. It is a rite of passage. Conversation is stiff around the table but everyone survives. A short time later, the graduates are lined up in front of the church. Various institutions are represented, both high schools and colleges. One by one, the pastor asks the question everyone knows is coming, "what are you going to do with the rest of your life?" Can I be honest with you?

I find that question, what are you doing to do with the rest of your life?, to be cruel. Especially to the youngest graduates. Have you ever wondered why we are forced to make the most important decisions of our lives at the youngest age, when we have the least amount of experience? There may be a field out there that will capture their passion that they don't even know exists today. I am not being critical when I say this. There is no occupational group I hold higher. However, I am convinced that why so many high school graduates want to be a teacher is that they only have experienced the educational setting. They admired a certain teacher and wanted to be one too. The graduates do their best to answer the question about their futures, but who really knows? At best, it is an educated guess. Only God knows what is in store for them. However, it is not just a question for graduates. It is a question for anyone who finds their lives changing. It is for anyone facing an uncertain future.

It is a question for the person who has labored long and hard in a certain vocation. They had experienced success, and now it is time to retire. Cards are sent and a party is held. Everyone says, "Congratulations! What are you going to do with the rest of your life?" You can only drown so many worms and hit so many golf balls. Someone once said to me, "Russ, this retirement thing is really overrated. I wish I could go back to work." What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

It is a question for anyone who stayed at home to raise their children. That was their career. You did a great job! You created wonderful people. They got an education and a job. Then, they moved out! They are doing great, but you are struggling with the question. What are you going to do with the rest of your life? You never thought you would ever miss the softball games and the band practices. You never thought you would miss the carpooling and the homework. It is now over, and your home is now neat and quiet. You miss the mess and the noise. Your home in its present state is going to drive you crazy. You are left alone with the question. What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

It is a question for anyone who has survived a horrible disease. All the treatments worked, and you are cancer free. You feel like you were spared, but for what? You are left with the question. What are you going to do with the rest of your life? God must have saved you for something, but you aren't sure what.

It is a question for anyone who has lost their job. The unthinkable happened. After all those years of loyal service, they sent you home. They called it a "cut back" but you know the truth. You were fired. You are too young to retire and too old to cry. There is a massive void in your heart, and the biggest question of all. What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

What are you going to do with the rest of your life? It is not just a question for graduating seniors. It is a question we all have to answer. God has a plan for everyone in this world. Jeremiah told those ancient Hebrews that God had a plan for them. I am telling you God has a plan for us. God has a plan for you! There is no greater mystery in life than discovering God's purpose for your life. You can be honest with me. If you have ever asked that question, "what are you going to do with the rest of your life?", say, "**Amen!**"

This morning, I want to give you three pieces of pastoral advice to help you answer that question. These are not original. They came from Dan Borchert, who is the pastor of the Christian Missionary Alliance Church in Bakerstown, California. These three points spoke to me and I believe they will speak to you. I am going to be quick. However, write them down for the next time you ask yourself the question, what are you going to do with the rest of your life?

Pastoral Advice #1: Face your fears

Fear is one of the great crippling factors in our lives. Sometimes, it is natural fear. For example, you may be afraid of heights. I am afraid of women and financial debt. (Maybe they go together?) Sometimes, it is a fear of not being accepted by others. That kind of fear is far more common and destructive. Sometime back, a university did a survey. They had ten people in a classroom, and the teacher would ask the class which line was the longest. Nine of the people participating were told to choose the 2nd longest. One person did not know what was going on.

In 75% of the tests they did, the one person would go along with what everyone else said. Why? Out of fear. Fear of being wrong. Fear of not being accepted. Don't be afraid to be different. We are not products made on an assembly line, identical. Each one of us is unique. God has made you in a certain way for a certain purpose. There are just certain things that you do naturally well. There are things that make you stand out. Embrace your uniqueness! If you think you can remember pastoral advice #1, face your fears, say, "**Amen!**" What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

Pastoral Advice #2: Forget your failures

One of the things we will not tolerate as a society is failure. One of the things we will not tolerate individually is failure. Years ago, I went to a continuing education event in Pittsburgh. It started eight days after Easter, so emotionally I had been on a roller coaster ride. There was the high of Easter morning, a big crowd. Then came the week after Easter, a small little group. I was still licking my wounds from the small little group when I arrived. I registered and found a seat at a table. I didn't know anyone, so I just sat there alone. The presenter started by telling his story. He was the pastor of one of these big mega-churches. He told one success story after another. With every story, I felt worse about myself. I remembered the small little group. When he started talking about his newest building, I couldn't take it anymore. Leaving all my material behind, I walked out and drove home. When I got home, I sat on my deck and felt sorry for myself. I sat there long enough in that state for my neighbor, Rick, to come home from work. He came up and sat next to me. He asked me what I was doing sitting there in the middle of the day. I told him about my workshop and my emotional state. He looked at me and said, "What is the big deal! You have known you are a loser for years. Go back to work and make it better." I hate to admit it, but he was right. We spend too much time worrying about our failures and not enough time trying to make our lives better. How much time do you spend reviewing your failures? How much time do you spend in the past? If you think you can remember pastoral advice #2, forget your failures, say, "**Amen!**" What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

Pastoral Advice #3: Follow your faith

Don't let money be the driving force in your life. Let God be the driving force in your life. I am always concerned about people who go into a certain vocation because they are going to make a lot of money. If God has a purpose for your life, then God will take care of you. I have a friend whose wife is an oncologist. She told me once, the greatest frustration in her life is colleagues who have no compassion for their patients. She said they didn't go into medicine to help people. They went into medicine to make money. What is the greatest driving force in your life? Is it making money? Is it serving God? If you think you can remember pastoral advice #3, say, "**Amen!**" What are you doing to do with the rest of your life?

Her name is Gustava Bennett Burrus. She was a proud member of the class of 2003 of Richmond High School in Richmond, California. She may have been the oldest person to graduate from high school in the history of the United States. She was 97 years of age.

To say the least, her story was unique from the rest of her classmates. She was born in 1905 in Louisiana, one of ten children, to sharecroppers. At the age of two, the family moved to Oklahoma to raise cotton. She dropped out of school in the fourth grade. At the age of 19, her family arranged her marriage to a doctor from Tennessee, Porter Burrus. He said he was a 30-year-old widower with no children. He lied. After the vows, she learned the truth. Porter was a 50-year-old widower with 8 children. He convinced her to stay. Their marriage lasted 38 years. They must have gotten along a little. They had 11 children of their own. Porter died in 1966 at the age of 88. They had 97 grandchildren, and countless great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren. She was so busy with all those children she never had time to finish school. At the age of 74, she went back to school to study computers. That course lead to other courses. When she was in her nineties, she told her son she wished would have graduated from high school. He persuaded to go back. He dropped her off in the morning and picked her up after school. They say, the chemistry between her and her classmates was amazing. They liked her and she brought out the best of them! She gave the class of 2003 this advice, *"If you don't want to get old, gray and wrinkled, die young."* I love that story. She graduated at 97 years old! I wonder if anyone asked her the question, what she was going to do with the rest of her life?

God had a plan for Gustava Bennett Burrus. God has a plan for everyone. One of the great mysteries in life is discovering God's plan for you. I think you can find it if you remember these three pieces of pastoral advice.

- 1. Face your fears.**
- 2. Forget your failures.**
- 3. Follow your faith.**

What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

Will you pray with me?