

May 21, 2017

Graduation Sunday 2017
Facing an Uncertain Future
Jeremiah 29:10-14

Opening words: I graduated from Warren Harding High School in June of 1975. It was a few weeks later than scheduled. It was delayed because the school levy failed in Warren and there were no classes during the month of December. Commencement was supposed to be held at Packard Music Hall but it was relocated to Mollenkopf Stadium. It was a warm muggy day and I can still remember gathering with my classmates in the auditorium of the old, now gone, Harding High School. The boys wore a black cap and gown; the girls wore red. Before walking into the stadium, our class president, a boy named Steve Porter, was asked to say a few words. I remember his words. He said it was a happy/sad day. Happy because we were graduating; sad because we would never be together again. I thought it was a happy/happy day. I was graduating and I would never see some of those jerks again! On that day, I did not appreciate the significance of that day. Forty-two years later I do. Graduation is more than mastering a certain amount of knowledge. Graduation is a doorway into the future. The question that every graduate must answer is, what are you going to do with the rest of your life? It is not just a question for graduates. It is a question for us all. Let me call this message *Facing an Uncertain Future*.

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."

William Bennett once said, "*All real education is an architecture of the soul.*" I find some value in that quote. If you find some value in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

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. Jeremiah is 52 chapters long and does not hide his personal struggles. As a matter of fact, the book states his struggles clearly. He was crippled with self-doubt. This is the truth. If anyone needed to be filled with self-confidence it was Jeremiah, because his country, Judah, was on a downward spiral. Judah had become 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 Judah's land. The entire country of Judah was facing an uncertain future. Our scripture reading for today reminded the citizens of Judah they were God's chosen people. Verse eleven must have acted as a cooling ointment on their open wounds. Speaking for God, Jeremiah 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. Despite their uncertain future, they were still loved by God. Despite their uncertain future, God still had a plan for them. In spite of their uncertain future, God still had a future for them. There was only one problem with all that: God's plan for them was a great secret. 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 for ancient Hebrews. It is our story as well. It is a question we ask graduates annually, but it is a question each one of us must answer. What are *you* going to do with the rest of your life?

Each one of us is different, yet we are all the same. We are forced to answer that question because life is always changing. It is a fair question to ask graduates, but it is also a fair question to ask the person who is suddenly unemployed. You thought you would always have a job, but you were wrong. It is a good question to ask the returning veteran. You have skills and have shown you can handle responsibility, but you are struggling in civilian life. It is a fair question to ask the stay-at-home mom whose children have left home. Your home is so quiet now. It is a fair question to ask the cancer survivor who wonders why they were saved. Why did God save you, but took others? It is a fair question to ask the newly retired. How do you fill that massive void? There is more to life than babysitting. It is a fair question to ask the recently divorced and widowed. What are you going to do with the rest of your life? Today, I want to help you answer that question.

In Bakersfield, California there is a Christian Missionary Alliance Church. The pastor of that church is a man by the name of Dan Borchert. He offers three pieces of pastoral advice for graduates who are facing an uncertain future. I believe they are valuable for anyone who is facing an uncertain future. I want to share them with you today. I hope you never forget them because someday you are going to have to answer the question, what are *you* going to do with the rest of your life? If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**" What are you going to do with the rest of your life?

Face Your Fears!

What frightens you? Our society is filled with many phobias. This list came from Life Science. Maybe your fear is on the list. They tell us 19.2 million American adults deal with phobias or extreme fear. This is their list:

- The Dentist
- Dogs

- Flying
- Thunder and Lightening
- The Dark
- Heights
- Talking to Strangers
- Rodents
- Insects
- Terminal Disease
- Speaking in Public

I understand that last one because I had a phobia about public speaking. This is my story:

I have never doubted my calling into the ministry, but there was a time I tried to ignore it. I ignored it for one reason, fear. It is hard to believe now, but the reason I ignored my calling for three years was fear. I was afraid of public speaking. The root of that fear was my dysfunctional eyes. Years later, I still can't read the scripture to you comfortably. There is a certain amount of anxiety.

As you face your uncertain future it is vital that you face your fears. Never forget it. Fear immobilizes us. Faith mobilizes us. God expects you to do something with your life. We are not identical products made on an assembly line. 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. There are certain things you can't do. 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?

Forget your Failures!

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 with a small group. I was still licking my wounds from the 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 those 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. I said, "I feel like a loser." He looked at me and said, "What is the big deal! We 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?

Follow your Faith!

Kathryn and I will celebrate our twenty-ninth wedding anniversary this Saturday. A friend of mine officiated at our wedding. His name was Mike. Mike's wife is named Lois; she is an oncologist. I once asked her what was the hardest thing about her job. Her answer surprised me. I was expecting to hear, long hours or sadness. She said, her colleagues. She said they went into medicine not to help people but to make money. They have no compassion and really don't care. Don't let money alone 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. What is the greatest driving force in your life? Is it making money? Is it serving God? Follow your faith. 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 was 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 old. 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 of sharecroppers. At the age of two, the family moved to Oklahoma to raise cotton. She dropped out of school in the fourth grade to help her mother with her younger siblings. 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. That totals nineteen children. Porter died in 1966 at the age of 88. They had 97 grandchildren, countless great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren. She was so busy with all those children, she never had time to finish high school. At the age of 74, she went back to school to study computers. That course led to other courses. When she was in her nineties, she told her son she wished she would have graduated from high school. He persuaded her to go back. He dropped her off in the morning and picked her up after school. They say she was a real curve buster. They say, the chemistry between her and her classmates was amazing. They liked her and she loved them. She brought out the best in them! On their graduation day, 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 from high school at 97 years young! I wonder if anyone asked her the question, what was she going to do with the rest of her life? This is my question for you today: what are *you* going to do with the rest of your life?

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