

“As You Go, Take Nothing”

Baccalaureate Mass
Seattle University
June 11, 2005
President Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

In order to make a point, I tend to exaggerate. Indulge me! Any truth worth stating is worth overstating.

What I want to ask you, the graduates of 2005 gathered in this solemn Baccalaureate Mass, is “What will you take with you from your Seattle University education?”

You’ll get a diploma, but that will be framed and go on the wall. You now have a resume, but that goes into the files of your prospective employers. You have heads full of knowledge, but if you haven’t already pressed “delete” on that after your last exam, it will almost all fade anyhow. Yes, you now have memories in your hearts, professors fondly or otherwise remembered, a pack of friends, but you cannot hold on to all of them or to any of them in the same way. You had money but we at Seattle University now have that and it has vanished from your and your parents’ savings accounts, and even your loans are held not by you but by the banks. So what do you take with you from your Seattle U. education?

Perhaps Jesus of Nazareth is speaking to you, when he says in the gospel that we have just heard: “As you go... take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.” No cash, credit cards, wallet, backpack, not two pairs of jeans, no Nikes, bike or cell phone! He says, “As you go, if you are to proclaim God’s presence in the world, you can’t take anything with you; you have to go just as you are.” In other words, as they say, “You can’t take it with you!”

So what do you really take with you from your education if “you can’t take it with you”? If you can’t take it with you, then all you can really take with you is you: your person, who you are, the person you have become, who you are becoming, the person you will be. The question at the end of a Jesuit Catholic education—though hopefully this is not the end of that education for you—is not so much what have you learned but, rather, in all that you have learned who have you become. What if “as you go” it is true that all you can really take with you that is real, that will last, that is alive and true and good, is the person you are. Is that okay with you?

That this is the truth—though do indulge my exaggeration to make my point—is confirmed by your university’s understanding of the human person, your university that is above all dedicated to educating the whole person. A person is not a person because of what she or he has, not more or less a person because of what he or she takes or keeps with him or herself. Your university believes and teaches that the autistic person, the person with Alzheimer’s or dementia, the mentally retarded person, the unborn person, the elderly person who is losing thought and memory, the person facing capital

punishment for crime committed, the newborn and the dying are equally persons, equally important, equally respected. As scripture says, “Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return.”

You see, we believe that a person is not constituted by what he or she has, but that a person—whatever his or her other capacities—is fundamentally a capacity for God and is constituted as a person by her or his relationship with God. You don’t have to know God—for knowing is more of that having—to be related to God. The unborn, the newborn, the amnesiac and the senile do not know God, but they are known by God, related to God. They are as much persons, defined in their humanity as capacities for God, as you or I are.

So though it may seem a bit exaggerated, it is true that you can take nothing from your Seattle University education except you, nothing that will last, nothing that is really yours. If you can take nothing that counts beyond the grave except you, then it is equally true that you can take nothing that counts beyond graduation except you. The question then is not what have you learned, but what have you learned that has become you. Or maybe it is what have you learned that will become you, and what have you learned that won’t.

I’m quite serious: Is it okay for you to walk away from graduation really with nothing but you and what you have learned that has become you? Not with information that you hold onto, but with knowledge that informs you; not with experience you have had, but with experience that makes you to be who you are. If it is okay for you to walk away from graduation with only this you, this educated you, and then I’m confident you will really use your education because it will have really become you. You will use it generously. You will use it to witness to the presence of God in you and in your world—whether or not you know God—because you will be revealing yourself as a person, known and loved by God, constituted as a person by relationship with God.

In that tricky little gospel passage, Jesus of Nazareth says—and hey, if you think I exaggerate to make a point, how about him!—“You received without payment, give without payment.” Doesn’t Jesus know how much the Jesuits, his namesakes, charge for tuition at SU? What he is really saying is rather, “Whatever you have received without payment; give without payment.” Sure, you paid for classes, knowledge, courses, and degrees. But in the process you received without payment whatever of all of this became you, became part of your capacity for God. Give this, give yourself, to others without payment.

I heard a news report the other day on NPR. It said that last month a man dressed in a black suit and tie was found soaking wet walking along a beach in England. He was unable to speak even a single word to tell the police who he was. So they took him to the station and sat him down at a table with a piece of paper and a pencil, hoping he’d write some words that would give them a clue to his identity. Instead he drew a picture. The police realized that what he had drawn was a piano. So they took him to a nearby church and sat him down at a piano. Still unable to say any word about who he was or write a

single word that would give a clue to his identity, he proceeded to play beautiful classical music for two straight hours. I never heard the end of the story, and I'm rather glad I didn't.

I wonder what I might draw or do, or what you might draw or do, if we were found in his condition. What would come from within that would make known our identity, who we really are. I think all of us are always in that man's condition, and that you this graduation weekend are uniquely there. Beneath all the words, beneath all you have learned or have, who have you become, who are you really, what is the music you are able to play that is so truly you that it will indeed reveal your identity to the world?

In 12 days my own mother will turn 100. My mom is not always completely with it. At times she doesn't know where she is or who is who. She and my father live in their own home here in Seattle. You might say she "robbed the cradle," for when they married she was 33 and he was 25. So now he is "only" 92. I was visiting them a while ago on a Sunday afternoon. My mom whispered to me as she pointed across the den, where she sits in her wheelchair, toward my dad reading the newspaper in his recliner: "I think I'm going to marry that guy over there!" I said, "Mom, you don't need to, the two of you have already been married for 67 years." At this she exclaimed, "We have! Does my mother know?"

You see, there it is! Beneath all words and memories, my mom likes my dad, even loves him, and knows he is the guy that it is right for her to be married to. That is her identity; that is who she is. That is her "piano." What is ours?

It really is okay to go forth from this weekend with nothing more than the person you have become. You'll do just fine, because, if you walk as the person you really are, you'll be walking in the presence of God. And that is indeed OK.