May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Commencement Address to the REC Seminary in Blue Bell, PA, on June 2nd 2012

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Intro:

Most Reverend and Rt. Reverend Sirs, Board of Trustees, Dean Abboud, Learned Faculty, Class of 2012, families of the class of 2012, Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is an honor for me to be invited to address you, the class of 2012. I want to thank the Board, Administration and the Faculty for the invitation.

The Reverend Professor Jonathan Riches was kind enough to make available to me a copy of a book that records a large portion of the history of this Seminary. What a learned and faithful history it is. You must be proud of your inheritance in this godly seminary. Not all seminaries have been or are so faithful to the Scriptures.

Let me also publicly thank Professor Riches and the classical Anglican Press for venturing to publish my book on the 39 Articles. Such courage is worthy of everyone’s admiration, no matter what one might think of the soundness of his judgment in that case.

I am informed that all of the members of the graduating class will be moving into various forms of Christian ministry, many of you into congregations. I have sought to keep that in mind.

Class of 2012, I want to offer you, in this address, some thoughts on the ministry in Christ into which you are about to enter, or commence. These thoughts are based on my reading of the Holy Scriptures and the great traditions of the Church, as well as on some lessons learned in the doing of the ordained ministry. These are convictions and principles that I wish I had known and taken seriously at my commencement some 54 years go, but alas are lessons I had to learn underway, in media res, after ordination. I hope to spare you some of the pain and wasted time I had to go through in order to come to these heart-felt convictions.
My remarks can be outlined in 2 points. The first is: “Take sin seriously; doing so will deliver you from false paths in ministry. The Second point is: “Take the Gospel even more seriously, for in the Gospel alone is the power of salvation, which salvation your ministry is to serve in specific ways.

Let me expand on those 2 points.

Take Sin Seriously!

Take Sin seriously: 1, in its eternal consequences, 2, in its enslaving, dehumanizing power in us as individuals and as societies, and 3, do this because the reality and nature of sin has important implications for the nature and manner of your ministry.

1. Sin in its eternal consequences.

The Lord Jesus took sin seriously in its ultimate consequences. He, the very truth and love of God incarnate, is the One who spoke and warned most often of the terrible eternal condemnation, that awaits the unrepentant and unforgiven sinner. It cannot, therefore be unloving for us to warn people as well. Jesus said” Do not fear him who can destroy the body, fear him that can destroy both body and soul in Hell”. The fact that people are moving toward final condemnation and an existence in Hell apart from Christ, should lend a profound urgency to our ministry, yours and mine. As the Apostle said, “The love of Christ constrains us.

One atheist put it this way: “If I believed what you Christians believe, I would crawl on my hands and knees over cut glass to make sure that all were warned”.

I know that speaking of Hell is neither politically correct nor easy. I too find it hard. I once, early in the ordained ministry, preached an entire series on John 3:16

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have life everlasting.”

And I never once mentioned “perish” in the entire series. That took some doing; in fact it illustrates the saying that “Denial is not only a river in Egypt”. I have repented of that failure of truth, and of that lack of love and courage.
God has created us for an eternal destiny and there are only two final destinies, Heaven or Hell. We can deny that fact, or avoid mentioning it, but we cannot change the fact of it, or the profound importance of it.

Class of 2012, if friends do not let friends drive drunk, then faithful and loving Christians do not let people approach eternity unaware of the destiny that awaits those who have to stand before the Lord clad only in the tattered rags of their own righteousness without the righteousness given us by Christ.

If Jesus in love warned those who heard Him speak, so must we in His Name warn those whom we know. Let your faithfulness to the truth, your concern for the lost and your love for them permeate your entire ministry. Pay the price, crawl if need be, over cut glass!

2. **In addition to the ultimate consequences of sin, we need to take sin seriously in its present dehumanizing enslaving power in us as individuals and as societies,**

To take sin seriously as a present, enslaving and dehumanizing power we need to be clear about the nature of sin as revealed in Christ and in His light, in our experience.

**What is sin?** Sin is our rejection of God as God. Sin is that personal failure and unwillingness to honor and love God with our whole heart, which characterizes all of our fallen human hearts and lives. Sin leads us into the idolatry of self-exaltation as the “god of our own lives” “I will do what I want to do”, and into additional forms of idolatry, trusting in things, people, sources and goals that we falsely believe will give meaning, purpose and security to our lives, instead of on God.

Sin is a hidden and sometimes open hostility to God and the neighbor. Sin having corrupted our hearts leads us to reject the rightful claims of God as the caring and righteous Lord who created us to know and love Him and to do His will, “Far be it for me to ever be embarrassed before others because You, God, want me to say or do something; that’s asking too much!” Sin also causes us to reject the neighbor as being as important to us as we are to ourselves.
Sin is pervasive; it has its influence in all of our person and personality, our thoughts, our way of seeing and evaluating things, our feelings, our will, and our deeds. From sin come all of the pride, the conflicts, insecurities and wars of life.

As corrupted by sin, we are in bondage, slaves to our sinful hearts, we are well beyond self-help, for as sinners we actually treasure being sinners. We desire to be the center of all things and we fight to keep it so.

Sin then is not just things we do or don’t do; these are our sins. No, sin is deeper, it is the sinfulness or our heart; it is the inner reason for the things we do or fail to do. And as such, it is bondage so profound that Scriptures say we need an entirely new heart, or to put it differently, we need a resurrection, for we are dead before God, in our trespasses and sins.

Historically, Anglicans have understood and confessed this terrible bondage of sin. It is like a deadly, fatal disease for which there is no human cure. That is why Article 10 of the 39 Articles says: “The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot (not “will not” but “cannot”) will to turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God”

The good news is that while we are beyond self-help we are not beyond God’s help and therein lays the point of your ministries. But, more of that will come shortly.

Also, we need to take note that this power of sin affects us not only as individuals but also as societies, congregations, cultures. St. Paul, in Romans 1:18-32 teaches us of the inevitable downward drift of every fallen society, unless it is arrested and lifted up by the power of the Gospel expressed through the transformed lives and actions of Christians, that is why the Lord calls us to be preserving salt in society For left to themselves fallen societies will degenerate under the power of sin, moving downward in stages from the break with God, to idolatry and corrupt religion, then to immorality, then to permitting unnatural sexual lusts and activities, and finally to accept socially, profound immorality and unrestrained lust while jeering at and persecuting those that do not go along with such crudeness, coarseness, and cruelty.

We know this from our own American society. We are clearly participating in this moral decline.
Wm Bennett in “Getting used to decadence” cites these facts: “In 1940 teachers identified as top problems with their students as talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the hall, cutting in line, dress code infractions, and littering. When asked the same question in 1990, (50 years later) teachers identified drug use, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, and assault.” And since 1990 we have added terror, violence, and rampages of murder in schools and colleges; not to mention that globally the 20th century was the most bloody in history and the 21st century is starting off in the same path. Sin is truly a destructive bondage.

3. **Now since sin is such a degenerating, corrupting and powerful bondage there are significant consequences for your ministry.**

First, it will be clear to you that if people cannot change their own hearts, we cannot change peoples’ hearts. It is beyond us. Only God can give a new heart, raise the dead, only God can save. In fact even as faithful Christians we still have the old Adam at work in us and we, ourselves, need to be continually rooted in and drawing from the grace and forgiveness of God given us in and through Christ. We all still have need for the general confession made specific in our hearts and lives by the Holy Spirit and for the daily comfort of God’s justifying grace.

Class of 2012 be warned, it is absolutely essential for you not to try to take on the responsibility that belongs to God alone. If you believe you are called to change hearts you will fail and be led to despair or be led to false gimmicks and manipulating techniques which will also surely fail. God alone by His power and grace can make people new. You can pray, and you can present the truth as it is in Jesus, but you cannot take the place of the Holy Spirit and change hearts, for that you can only trust the One whom you serve and who changed your heart. More of the nature and responsibility of your ministry will follow in the second part of this address.

Taking sin seriously will also liberate you from several reoccurring approaches to Christian ministry that are false and fruitless in the face of the power of sin. These approaches cannot address the true need of fallen mankind.

First you will not base your ministry on moral exhortation, as many do, even some evangelicals do.
The Pharisees tried that approach. It affects no fundamental change, and whatever moral direction and restraint it can achieve, in some, for some of the time, is superficial. Such morality is really like tying apples on a dead Apple tree and claiming a harvest. The soul is still dead in pride and sins.

In the early days of my ministry there was a movement called Moral Rearmament, it urged high morals, drawn from general revelation and from our Judeo-Christian heritage in the West, but in the end it bore no real fruit and was crushed by the power of sin in the downward spiral of Western culture.

Despite its failure, moralistic preaching is prevalent enough to give preaching a bad name. Here is how the dictionary refers to preaching: “to preachify—to give tedious, longwinded moral advice”... “a preachment—a tedious discourse or sermon”

Graduates, heavy handed moralistic preaching will either lead the sensitive Christians in the congregation into weariness or despair or feed the false self-righteousness of any Pharisees in the congregation. And moralistic nagging will be of no interest to the lost around you. The Bible never starts with our works. In Christ our deeds flow from a prior source in the grace and Gospel of God. Don’t become a moralistic nag!

Next, if you take the enslaving power of sin seriously, you will not seek to gain the interest of the congregation or those in the community by modernizing the message, by changing the biblical Gospel.

Somehow I graduated from Seminary believing that it was my responsibility to so state things Christian in a modern way, with a modern, pertinent message, in order to gain the interest of people. It was to be a message less supernatural and more believable in a skeptical age. I should have known better. Jesus was not acceptable in his own age apart from the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit working in people’s hearts. The responsibility to forge a new Gospel was a terrible burden and is an approach to Christian ministry that inevitably fails.

Why does it fail? It fails because there is only one Gospel. God’s Gospel alone is the power of God unto salvation. St. Paul stated that there were those in Galatia who preached another gospel, and then he added, “not that there is another Gospel”. There is only one Gospel and it is God’s Gospel, not ours. We are messengers not authors.
Class of 2012, be faithful to that apostolic, biblical Gospel. The truth remains the truth forever. Look at many of the main-line Churches and you will see the fruitlessness of man-made gospels which are no gospels at all and cannot deliver from the power and condemnation of sin.

And finally, if you take sin seriously, you will not build your ministry by seeking to get people’s attention by focusing on their felt-needs. The felt-needs of us sinners are largely shaped by the sin that colors our hearts and minds. To focus there will only feed the idolatrous self-exaltation and self-preoccupation that is our deepest problem as sinners. God then becomes important to us only in so far as he can do things for us. He becomes our servant and not we his. What a terrible reversal of biblical teaching. It is, in fact, blasphemous! “He who loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s sake will find it.”

Willow Creek, the very large, famous, “Seeker Friendly” Church is Chicago, did a self study several years ago, and concluded “We have entertained many and converted few”. Taking sin seriously will free you from following the path of serving the felt self-interest of sinners.

Transition

What then are we to do? What is the ministry to which we all, clergy and laity in various ways are called? What sort of ministry will God use to give new life, to rescue and transform sinners, to draw the lost unto Himself and to the fellowship of fellow Christians and to serve as salt and light in society? This is indeed one of the profoundest of questions before you, as you begin your new ministries, and it remains a question we all must answer as Christians!

That leads us to the second part of our address: First take sin seriously, then, second, take the Gospel even more seriously, for in the Gospel alone is the power of salvation, which salvation your ministry is to serve in specific ways.

Let’s listen to St. Paul speaking to Timothy, where he addresses precisely this question.

Read 2nd Timothy 4:1-5

1 I charge you, therefore, before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; 2 Preach the
word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and teaching.  

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;  

4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.  

5 but as for you, watch in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Here the Apostle sets forth a list of priorities for your ministry and priorities for any lively and growing, fruitful congregation: preach, teach, and evangelize

1, Gospel-centered Preaching, 2, Teaching the whole counsel of God and 3, Evangelism.

1. Gospel-centered preaching

Only God speaking by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel can save: that is convert, justify, sanctify and sustain us until glory. Only the Good News of Jesus Christ, of Christ crucified for us sinners, of Christ risen triumphant over sin, Satan and death, of Christ ascended and even now reigning over us and all things, at the right hand of God, of Christ active with us and in us now in and by the Holy Spirit, and of Christ coming again to judge the living and the dead and to usher in the final consummation of all things, only that Christ through the Gospel is sufficient to unite us to Himself as our Lord and head, to begin, to continue, to deepen and to consummate our lives as Christians, and to send us forth on mission. Therefore, preach the Gospel!

Class of 2012, when you preach, every sermon, including when you are preaching on texts from the Old Testament, should show, in some obvious manner, that its message is dependent upon the grace of God given us forever in Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Christian life and behavior is possible, true and good only as a thankful and surrendered response to the holy love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus. Grace first and then response: Grace has always been foundational; it has always been so in our relationship with the Lord God.

This priority of grace has been true from the very beginning, First the gift of Creation and the Garden and then the warning about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, first the Lord’s sovereign deliverance of Israel from Egypt and then the wisdom and guidance of the 10 commandments. St. Paul, in all of his epistles, does not speak of our works until he first spells out the Gospel in the first part of
the epistle. It is always grace and then response, never the reverse. Class of 2012 may it ever be so with you in your preaching.

I trust you noticed the urgency and high priority the Apostle gives to preaching: “in season and out of season, which is all of the time.” Take every opportunity to preach Christ and Him crucified. For how shall they believe if they have not heard, or how can we keep on believing and growing if we are not continually hearing?

And do not be afraid to preach the truth as it is in Scripture read in the light of the Gospel. Only a hireling avoids telling the truth. You present to the congregation the truth, as it is in Scripture, and the Spirit will search the hearts of the congregation. The word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword. But, take note; it is the Word and not you, that is the judge. After all, you too are a sinner and stand with the rest of us under the Word of God. Don’t be afraid to let the congregation know that you are a sinner standing with them under the Word of God. Take the congregation and yourself to the text, to the Word of God read in the light of Christ Jesus.

To be sure, some may object to the truth, that is why the Apostle tells Timothy to have courage and “endure hardships”. God will see you through. And to those being saved the Word will be as a fountain of purest water in a thirsty land.

Preach in season and out of season, use every opportunity, for it is the Gospel alone that is the power of God unto salvation.

2. Teach: teach of the whole counsel of God

We all have a way of seeing things, how the things of the world and life fit together, what is valuable and why. It is called our world-view. We form this almost unconsciously, drawn from life growing up at home, at school and from all of our experience; some convictions will be drawn from Church, though increasingly fewer Americans are raised going to church or being the Church.

St. Paul tells us that since we form our world-view in the context of a fallen society that our world-view is corrupted and needs to be corrected. Listen to his words to the Christians living in Rome:
Romans 12:1-2 “I appeal to you brothers, therefore, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that by testing you may discern what is the good, acceptable and perfect will of God.”

“I appeal to you brothers”

This is an urgent appeal, serious business; it is not a suggestion!

“Therefore...by the mercies of God”

This Apostolic appeal to us rests upon and arises from God’s great gift of His mercy to us through the Gospel which is set forth in Chapters 1-11 of Romans, Here again is grace first, followed by our response.

The Apostle cries out to us to respond to the Lord, with a profound surrender of ourselves to Him, as a living sacrifice.

“To present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, this is your spiritual service”

The Apostle is comparing and contrasting us and our sacrifice with the Old Testament Animal sacrifices. There is a similarity and there are differences.

The similarity is that the sacrifice is total in both cases. The animal is slaughtered and dies and we by grace of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit die, die to the self-run life and surrender to the Lord, Did not our Lord say: “deny yourself,” (self denial), pick up your cross daily (self-sacrifice) and follow me”, (self-submission).

But there are differences between the two sacrifices as well, for in this surrendering of our lives to the Lord, we find that we are being freed to live in fellowship with Him. We are a living, on-going sacrifice.

And further, our sacrifice is spiritual. It is our “spiritual” worship or service. The Greek word translated “spiritual” means “of the reason, relating to the mind”, from which we get the word logical. The animal was sacrificed without its
knowledge of why or ability to understand why. Our sacrifice is our self-conscious, reasoning surrender to our Savior and Lord.

And our minds are centrally involved in this, our sacrificial worship of God. The centrality of our minds leads us to the next verse which brings up the importance of teaching and learning in our Christian life and ministry: Here is how the Apostle puts it:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that by testing you may discern what is the good, acceptable and perfect will of God.”

The renewing of our mind is central because to live differently in Christ, we need to see and think differently.

Note, the Apostle assumes that we are all already conformed to this corrupted age to a very significant degree. We start out behind the 8-ball. Our minds are in need of transformation. To be transformed is not simply a matter of will. First and foremost our minds, our deepest heart-felt convictions and understandings, need to be re-formed, for “as a man thinketh in His heart so He is.”

Since we have world-views already corrupted, we need to be getting deep into the Scriptures so that the Scriptures are getting deep into us, personally and corporately, transforming our minds. This involves the sacrifice of hard work and the setting aside of time to study and learn and to teach and learn. Our aim is not only to read the Scriptures but to develop a scriptural mind-set, so that we see life, see everything, though the lens of the Scriptures as we live and make our decisions. As leaders this is essential if we are to lead in the right direction.

Notice also he is speaking to us as believers, as saints, converts. This work of renewing our mind by the word of God is not for our justification, our being put right with God. Our justification is Christ’s gift pure and simple and is full, final, and complete from day one, when we are joined to Jesus through the Gospel by the Spirit. This sacrifice to which the Apostle is urging us is part of our sanctification (it is part of our growth in Christ, our maturing in Christ, a life-long process.

And central to this sanctifying work of the Spirit in us is the renewing of our minds in and through the Word of God written. “These things”, writes Paul in another place concerning the Scriptures, “are written for our learning”!
And so it is that we, you and the entire congregation, are to sacrifice ourselves. How are we to make this sacrifice? We are to do it by learning and teaching, teaching and learning, in order together to gain a biblical world-view.

And the great goal of a biblical world-view is what? It is that we may all know, test, discern and do what it is that God is calling us to do. Can anything be more important?

My brothers and Sisters, a fruitful ministry is learning and teaching ministry. A growing congregation is learning and teaching congregation. We simply cannot ask the weekly sermon alone to bear the weight of forming in ourselves and in the congregation the ability to see things with the mind and eyes of Christ. A sacrificial commitment on all of our part to teaching and learning and growing deep in the Scriptures is what the apostle has in mind.

Class of 2012, I pray it is what you will have in your mind as you set priorities in your ministry and for the congregations in which you will serve. Fight for it, begin with whoever will come but begin and begin right away. Never give up.

Teach and have others teach that you and all may learn.

Incidentally, if you are wondering where to start this teaching in order to give an overview and frame-work for the on-going teaching and learning, why not begin with the Anglican Cliff notes: the 39 Articles. (I’ll bet some of you thought I might suggest that.) (I can even suggest a book that might be of some help to you in teaching the 39 Articles.)

Lastly, a word about evangelism.

The word of the Apostle to Timothy concerning evangelism is direct and simple: “Do it!” (And help the congregation to do it.) Do the work of an evangelist and fulfill your ministry. Do not leave your ministry unfulfilled. Even if you preach and teach, but do not evangelize you will have left your ministry unfulfilled. (as many have and do)

This call to evangelize is given to both clergy and the laity. I know of no growing Church that neglects evangelism.
To the fearful among us, let me reassure you that sharing the Gospel is not to be an attack or imposition on the unwary. It is to be done in love, with respect, sensitive to and ready for proper opportunities that God will surely send. And above all we need to be ready when, because of your love shown to them, people ask you about your behavior and faith. At such times we need to be prepared and ready to tell them of the Lord and the Gospel.

Let me just say this, on the one hand, if you and the leaders of the congregation do not model, urge, teach and plan for evangelism it will not be done. It is too counter-cultural. Let me repeat that: if you and the leaders of the congregation do not model, urge, teach and plan for evangelism it will not be done.

And, on the other hand, for us not to be trained in and doing evangelism is to be disobedient to the Lord and a sign of something lacking in our hearts, a sign that our love has grown tepid or cold. Let me repeat that as well: for us not to be trained in and doing evangelism is to be disobedient to the Lord and a sign of something lacking in our hearts, a sign that our love has grown tepid or cold.

Ah, but there is a remedy for us. Once again we are led to the Gospel, because active evangelism comes from our deep awareness of the majesty, sovereignty and holiness of the Lord and of God’s love and care in Christ for us and others, despite our sinfulness, and from an awareness of the profound need of all persons for Christ. We ourselves are led back to the Gospel, because it is through the power of the Gospel to reveal Christ to us, in our own hearts, that our hearts are made alive and that we find within ourselves a deep desire to tell everyone of Him.

Class of 2012, be much in the Gospel and in Christ’s grace and power, Do the work of an evangelist, do not leave your ministry unfulfilled. Fulfill your ministry and help your people to fulfill theirs as well.

Conclusion

Well, Class of 2012, there you have it: Take sin seriously, avoid false approaches to ministry, and take the Gospel far more seriously. Live in it or better in Him. Preach, teach and evangelize, Tell the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, that is the heart of your calling. Tell the truth as it is in Jesus, nothing more (don’t try to
be the Holy Spirit) and nothing less (tell the whole truth in Jesus). Yours is a profound privilege, and full of joy and promise. And God will surely bless your work done humbly in His Name.

    So help you God! Amen!