

Noon 9/7/21: Convocation 2021 Sermon – President David McAllister-Wilson

Theme: Celebration/Welcoming new students/Return—“Orientation”

Scripture:

- Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-18
- 2 Timothy 4:1-5

This is my 20th year as president; 40th year at Wesley. Each year, I ask myself: “What do we do here?” And I try to put it into a message of welcome, and welcome back, for those who have chosen to be a part of this community. This year, more than ever, we long for reorientation because we have been so disoriented and alienated, haven’t we?

I never know how the Spirit is going to interrupt me as I think about what to say on this day. This time, it was through a letter from the Commandant and Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps addressed to Marines as we departed from Afghanistan. It was shared with me by our Board member, General James Cartwright. As I read it, try to translate it into your own call to serve, even though it is very different.

“We both believe - without question - that your service was meaningful, powerful, and important. You answered the call to serve, proudly carrying the torch of so many generations of Marines before you. You put the good of others before yourself. You fought to defend your country, your family, your friends, and your neighbors. You fought to prevent terror from returning to our shores. You fought for the liberty of young Afghan girls, women, boys, and men who want the same individual freedoms we enjoy as Americans. You fought for the Marine to your left and the Marine to your right. You never let them down. You never, ever gave up. You lived with purpose, with intention. Whether you realize it or not, you set an example for subsequent generations of Marines - and Americans - by living our core values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment. Was it worth it? Yes. Does it still hurt? Yes.”

This struck me because my presidency began in the wake of 9/11 at the start of this war. And because, it reads like a pastoral letter to those who are wondering if their sacrifice was worth it. For me, everything always comes back to the church and its ministry and to what I do. So, I couldn't help but read this and think of our seminarians, and alumni, who may be asking a similar question about their decision to answer their call and come to seminary. Because ministry is not a string of rewarding successes culminating in the arrival of the Kingdom Easter Sunday at 11:00. And the last 20 years, especially the last two, have been a difficult struggle for churches and people of faith.

Is it worth it? How do we sustain the sense of purpose with which we started? The letter to the Marines ends with their motto, "Semper Fi," short for the Latin, "Semper Fidelis," always faithful. Which is also St. Paul's direction in his letter to his young protégé, Timothy this morning. "Preach the Gospel in season and out of season." Let me offer this same advice to all of us as we think about our mutual call to ministry and how we sustain the faith amid doubt and disappointment and adversity.

These last 20 years have spanned not only the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also the Great Recession, dramatic reminders of the pervasive evil of racism, the rise of authoritarianism globally and poisoned politics here at home. Oh, and historic floods, fires and, a global pandemic. It seems Pharaoh has not yet been moved.

Facebook was founded in this period also. I don't mean they are one of the plagues, necessarily. But their mission statement now sounds like a soured and cynical vision: "To give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." Well, that didn't exactly work out. Instead, it seems, much of the time, social media doesn't create community, it breaks it down into micro bubbles inflated by conspiracy theories.

Professor McCurry often quotes his old boss, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "You are entitled to your opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts." Not so, it seems. There's been a fundamental breakdown of consensus about what is true, or even, real. We can't agree about the existence of weapons of mass destruction or whether Hillary was running a pedophile ring from a pizza place; or, whether racism is systematic; or, if we should be vaccinated or take horse de-worming medication instead. Too many people question fundamental scientific facts like global warming and the pandemic.

My son-in-law, a public-school science teacher, calls this an "epistemological crisis." Because we no longer have confidence in whether we can know what we think we know. Some of this skepticism is important and necessary to gain deeper understanding and achieve a more just society. We have come to learn about cognitive biases which disguise our self-centeredness and thereby keep oppressive structures in place. So, part of the role of a seminary is to instigate an epistemological crisis, and thereby facilitate something like Paul's experience on the Damascus Road, so that "scales may fall from our eyes." Through study, dialogue, worship, and prayer, we allow ourselves to be de-constructed, and rebuilt from within. In the words of Jesus' own prayer in the garden: "Not my will but thine." The Christian spiritual journey is from hubris and hypocrisy to humility.

But at some level, trust is necessary for society to function; trust in each other and in our institutions. Because the big decisions about life - what it means and how it is meant to be lived are more than a collection of facts; they are understood and decided beyond mere rationality.

Here's the truth. Humans are guided by faith, not by facts. As Paul says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." But I don't mean faith in God, necessarily. Ironically, the larger and more complex our world, and the more complex our tools of communication, the more we pick and choose the meta- narratives in which we will place our trust, in which we have faith. Those narratives are nurtured in our cultural tribes and articulated by their leaders. When someone preaches, teaches, or makes speeches, we don't start with, "Is she speaking the truth?" We start with, "Is he one of us?" That's how it can be that Dr. Fauci and Governor DeSantis are each trusted avatars of the faith of increasingly separate tribes. And the other voice is not heard or considered fake news.

What does that mean for our tribe those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and his good news about the Kingdom of God? And what about those who have chosen to answer a call to lead? This is the question at the heart of what it means to decide to become a member of the Wesley community. Chapel Elder Cathy Abbott suggested the reading from Joshua this morning as a passage appropriate for opening convocation. Joshua poses the challenge, "Choose this day." "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

‘Choose this day.’ That’s a good dramatic way to start a semester. But really, most of our life choices are not this stark or once and for all. Becoming a Marine may be like that, but seminary is not. I know it is a commitment of time and money, but you don’t take vows and we don’t shave your head. Instead, it’s a choice about who we want to become and how we will be formed in mind and heart. We will “choose this day” often, over and over again. Sometimes, for instance, as we struggle writing mid-term papers.

Here’s a way I think about it. When our oldest son was 15, he wanted to go to a party at a friend’s house, a friend he’d gotten in trouble with before. And I was pretty sure the parents weren’t home. I told him he couldn’t go, and he came back at me with a loaded question: “Don’t you trust me?” I knew I could have won the battle and lost the war by simply saying “no.” Because over the next few years, my ability to keep him safe and moving in the right direction was going to be increasingly based on trust – me in him and him in my advice. So, I said, “I trust you; I don’t trust the situation.” And we talked about why. Now, he didn’t then hug me and say, “You’re right dad.” But 25 years later, he remembers. And it did draw a circle around us rather than a battle line between us.

We choose a situation. And we draw that circle, within which we will build faith and trust. Seminary is about who you become as much as what you know. And that's true of faculty and staff and board members, as well as students. This is what it is to be a part of the seminary community, and of any worshipping community our alumni serve. We construct the chrysalis in which our shared faith will gradually take shape.

In this tribe, we draw the circle wide. At Wesley, truth is fostered in a community that is diverse and holds each other close and accountable. We believe in the power of prayer together; and to be together in community. We believe in science and in a rigorous intellectual life. And so, we believe in doubt – doubting what we think we know – and in pushing each other in love in order to grow in wisdom. And we believe in being boldly idealistic about God's desire for justice in the world and in the Holy Spirit's ability to transform all our situations into a beloved community as the nature of our community and the substance of our courses becomes the content of our character. That's how trust is built and ultimately, how we will be trusted in the world.

There is a special challenge for our seminary in this city. In the entrance hall, to the CIA, in bold letters are words from the Gospel of John: "And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." But I found that is not reproduced on anything in the gift shop at the Agency. There, you only find 9/11-inspired aggressive patriotism. "The truth that will set you free" is our intel, its pursuit is our mission.

There are seasonal changes in the flow of history, even as dramatic as climate change. This country is experiencing one as we end a 20-year war, look ahead to the new normal of a post-COVID world, and hold before us the ancient foes of oppression and poverty. “But in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and the kingdom, we are charged to persist, in every season.”

I’m not a saint and I’m not your Commandant, but as we convene this semester, my message to those who are preparing for ministry at Wesley, and those that have done so these last 20 years has Timothy in mind; and is an adaptation of that letter to the Marines. Answering the question, for me, as well as you: “Is this worth it?”

I believe, without question – that our service will be meaningful, powerful, and important. We answered the call humbly, carrying the torch of so many generations of Christian leaders before you. We will put the good of others before ourselves. We will work to restore souls and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord; and bring that about as we lead people to love God with all their hearts, souls and minds and their neighbors as themselves. And we will strive to do good well as we feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted and welcome strangers. We will never, ever give up. We will live with purpose and intention. Whether we always realize it or not, we will be setting an example for subsequent generations of Christians by living our core values of Faith, Hope and Love. Well done, good and faithful servants. Keep the faith.