



Installation Sermon

Inspiring Generous Faith; Engaging the Heart of the University

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Inspiring Generous Faith; Engaging the Heart of the University

Good evening. This is an exciting night for me and the rest of the chaplaincy staff and campus ministers, and for the University of Richmond. I had some sense of the strengths and promise of this place before accepting the job, but the past few weeks have expanded my imagination of how excellent a small university can be. I have been greeted with warmth and enthusiasm from all sides. President Ayers, members of the board of trustees, chaplain *emeritus* Burhans, members of the chapel guild, faculty, staff, students, parents and friends, I am grateful and honored to be here. Thank you for welcoming Abby and me so warmly.

Six weeks ago I struck up a conversation with a student on the forum in front of the chapel. “Are you new here?” I asked. “Yep,” said the student. “I’m new here too,” I said. “Are you a freshman,” she asked, innocently. “I was thinking you might be a junior or possibly a senior.” “I’m the new University Chaplain,” I said. “I only arrived on campus a couple of days ago, so I feel a bit like a first year.” She studied me carefully, and after a long pause said, “A chaplain . . . What exactly does a chaplain do?” It was a good question, and in my enthusiasm a whole host of responsibilities tumbled forth. “My job as a chaplain is to walk alongside individuals in moments of joy and sadness. My job as a chaplain is to cherish the history of the institution and its Baptist roots, while encouraging a variety of faiths to flourish. My job as a chaplain is to help students engage one another across lines of faith difference. My job as a chaplain is to be authentically who I am, and express the most generous parts of my Christian faith, so that others may be authentically who they are. And my job as a chaplain is to help the institution live up to its highest ideals,” I said breathlessly. The student listened patiently. “Right. Can you put that into a sentence?” I said, “That was one sentence. Didn’t you hear all the semi-colons?” Her question was the kind of pointed insightful question UR students are good at asking. One sentence.

The answer to the student’s question is not easy. The chaplaincy is a cherished part of the University community, having been led so nobly by Dr. Burhans for 30 years and so graciously by Chaplain Kate more recently. As we move into the next phase of the chaplaincy’s life, I want to partner with others to build on the strengths of the past and expand our work into the future. In that spirit, I suggest the answer to the student’s insightful question digging at the core of the chaplaincy’s work is this: “Inspiring generous faith; engaging the heart of the University.”

I want to share with you why I’ve chosen these particular words for the role of the chaplaincy at this time in the institution’s history. I use the word “inspiring” because too often religious leaders have coerced, pushed, prescribed and dictated what faith should be. My hope is that the chaplaincy will be a place that inspires through thoughtful gestures and tender friendships, that meets students where they are, walks beside them to where they are going, and helps guide them on a journey of reflection and discovery. I use the word “generous” because too often people of faith are not generous, but are rather judgmental, mean-spirited, and moralistic, instead of kind, compassionate, and inviting. My hope is that the chaplaincy will be a place that

models a generous faith, one that welcomes and includes, invites and shares, and seeks the experience and wisdom present in all spheres of our common life. And I use the word “faith” because the role of the chaplaincy is not merely to affirm common goodwill, or uphold socially acceptable values, or lend its voice to ethical reflection – though all may be a part of the role. The chaplaincy is here to inspire faith, to articulate the life of the spirit in the midst of a university committed to educating the whole person, body, mind, and soul. I use the word faith because faith is an inclusive term. It is inclusive of traditional forms of religious expression, and on a college campus in the 21st century that looks more and more like the whole wide world, faith is a word that those who express the life of the spirit in non-traditional ways may connect with. I use the word faith because as a Christian pastor who stands in the mainline Protestant tradition, I want to encourage a flourishing of faith traditions on campus that reflect the complex religious ecology of our ever-shrinking world and help facilitate conversations of mutual insight across lines of difference. In the historic Virginia Baptist tradition so significant to this place, my desire is that the chaplaincy will continue to cultivate the ideals of religious freedom, and the free inquiry of conscience and expression.

In the passage from Matthew’s gospel Zach read for us this evening, Jesus says we should love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our minds, and we shall love our neighbors as ourselves. It is a sentiment at the center of the Christian tradition, and one which my friends from other traditions may also recognize. One might expect a chaplaincy to be concerned about matters of the soul and the heart, but Jesus adds two other significant words. First, he adds the word “mind.” The chaplaincy is here to thoughtfully and rigorously engage the life of the mind, to affirm the academic mission of the university, and help students integrate their sacred stories with their academic pursuits, to help them reflect carefully on their own experience and that of others, and to see the life of faith as not only a process of the heart, but one that inspires and informs the mind.

Jesus then adds another word, “neighbor,” and says loving one’s neighbors is equally important, perhaps even indistinguishable from loving God. Thus, the chaplaincy will seek to join those who come from all perspectives, of different faiths and no faith, and the many who are not sure exactly what they believe, yet are animated by love, by doing good for others, and together we’ll do the beautiful and complex work of loving our neighbors near and far – and the equally beautiful and complex work of helping students and others learn to love themselves as cherished gifts.

As a Methodist the integration of heart, mind, and soul is central to my heritage. The Methodist movement began on the campus of Oxford University in the early-1700’s. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, was both a priest and a fellow at Lincoln College. He served in essence as a university chaplain, and so imbedded in my DNA is a sense that knowledge, faith, and love of neighbor – head, heart, and hands – are friends traveling the same path.

I now to turn to the second part of the phrase, “Engaging the heart of the University.” There might be some who would suggest that universities don’t have a heart, who would say the university is designed solely to give young people the skills needed to acquire knowledge and build a career. Or that its primary purpose, as a friend suggested about an institution not unlike our own, is to serve as a kind of transit camp through which young people pass on their way from Yankee bravado to Southern civility. I believe the university is more than a spirit-less marketplace of ideas and ever-increasing knowledge.

I use the phrase “Heart of the University” to say the University of Richmond has ethical dimensions. In other words, the purpose of a university is not simply to prepare a workforce; it also functions to shape character. At the heart of our university is a conversation. It is a conversation that stretches from one generation to the next, one which is always evolving, always adding more and different voices, always listening for new discoveries and insights, new wisdom and further beauty. It is a conversation that displays and compares, tests and evaluates, that cherishes tradition and explores discovery, that uncovers the neglected to find the beautiful, scrutinizes the new to find the good, and examines the old to find the true. The university does these things because they are worth doing for their own sake.

The role of the chaplaincy is to engage the heart of the university by joining that on-going conversation. It is not to chair the conversation, or set the agenda, for that would suggest a power that I don’t have, nor desire, and history shows when religious leaders have tried to set the agenda, things often go very badly. However, it is my role, and the role of the wider chaplaincy, with our partner campus ministries, to engage the conversation as a diverse range of voices among many other voices, to offer perspective and insight, to listen carefully and speak tenderly, to point to the eternal and enduring, and hold up our highest ideals.

Zoe read for us a text from the Hebrew prophet Micah who suggests the faithful be known for their kindness and humility as much as their thirst for justice. And so this chaplaincy at its best will engage the heart of the university with kindness and humility, and will form partnerships of good will across campus and in the wider Richmond community to offer programming and reflection on the ethical dimensions of our shared life, on the significant social issues of our time, and help students and others build a life of purpose and meaning, and learn to love one another as sisters and brothers.

I think often of the early conversation I had with that student only a couple of days after the two of us arrived on campus. In some sense we were both first years, both a bundle of nerves and excitement, sharing ideas and reflecting on how fortunate we felt to be a part of this campus, but in a deeper sense we were two new voices joining an on-going conversation that is at the very heart of who we are, a conversation as inspiring, and generous, and engaging as the very heart of God.

Long may it be so.

Amen.