
Your Senior Year – Blessing

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
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Thank you! Thank you so much for inviting me this evening. It is an honor to speak at this Baccalaureate before so many distinguished people – all sorts of teachers and administrators, parents and grandparents, and friends – and the MOST distinguished people here : YOU, the Holy Innocents students of the Class of 2018!

I add my congratulations to all those you are receiving today and tomorrow. Congratulations to you. You commence tomorrow. You begin.

(My old high school Latin teacher would enjoy that I know what the word “commencement” literally means. It means to “begin!) You begin a life away from high school! You will not have to be a part of these high school programs again!

I am honored to be here; but, I must admit, I don't know whether I have anything to say to you students tonight. I don't know that I have much to say to you students. You've heard it all by now. So, go ahead, tune out if you want, and I will say a few words to your parents and grandparents and family friends.

Well, wait, there is one thing I have to say to students, and it comes by way of a spiritual confession. (Confession is good for you; remember that.) I have a confession to make tonight. It has to do with the week I graduated from high school, from a school whose name I will not mention, but it's first syllable is “wood” and its last syllable is “ward.” It was way back in the medieval Latin ages. I was a member of the Class of 1974. But that's not my confession.

My confession is this. On the evening of my graduation from high school, I skipped the baccalaureate service. I don't even remember what I did instead. I was trying to be free. I was following the wind. “Vanity of vanities,” says the Book of Ecclesiastes, from which we just heard tonight! “All is vanity,” “All is wind, everything is wind,” is another way that can be translated. Everything is over-rated.

I wasn't interested in what I considered unnecessary ceremonial, and so I skipped the service. But God got back at me! God made me a priest in the church!

So, here's the one thing I want to say to you students. Whether it's karma or not, things have a way of evening out in life. I think tonight, personally, that I am experiencing God's tremendous sense of humor. God has a great sense of humor. I skipped my baccalaureate service, so now God has me speaking at a baccalaureate service. Thanks a lot, God!

Yes, I really have no idea what to say to you who are graduating. You know so much more than I did at your age. You really do, whether you've been skipping things or not. Knowledge and data and experience are flying at all of us these days. Take it in.

Tonight, then, I simply suggest to you—I suggest to all of us—that we remember. Remember. Take a moment right now to remember someone this past year. In particular, remember someone who has blessed you. Tonight, a baccalaureate service, is a night of blessing.

The person I must remember, the person I really must pay tribute to tonight, was one of the most important bachelors of my life. If he were alive today, he would be pointing out that the word “baccalaureate” derives from the Latin word, bachelor. Somehow, we have gotten from bachelor, to bachelor’s degree, to this baccalaureate sermon tonight.

Yes, personally, I am remembering my high school Latin teacher, back in the good old days. Before the word “Latin” makes you tune out again, though, let me simply describe my teacher’s room. I am speaking about a man named Major A.T. Ferguson. The late Abe Ferguson.

They don’t make classrooms like Major Ferguson’s classroom anymore. I mean literally. They don’t allow them. This classroom, literally, had no windows. And no upstanding high school would allow what Major Ferguson did in his classroom. He smoked cigarettes. Mercy! He would rock back and forth, in his front desk chair, conjugating Latin verbs, and smoking cigarettes.

It sounds horrible, doesn’t it? We were stuck in a windowless, smoke-filled room, with a man smoking cigarettes. To make matters worse, there were only two posters on the blank walls. There was a blackboard up front, but nothing on the three other walls except one 3 foot by 5 foot poster on each side wall. One poster was a chart that showed how 90 percent of the words in the English language were derived from Latin. During a few moments of every class, that chart was interesting.

But, the other poster! The other poster was a big photograph of the beautiful French model, Bridgette Bardot, in a sleek outfit, on a motorcycle. So, we had a choice of three things to look at: a poster of Latin, a chain-smoking old man, or a poster of a beautiful model.

We could have been bored and paralyzed in those classes. But we weren’t. We actually learned in those classes to pay attention. I played piano in those days, and Major Ferguson called me “Monsieur Horowitz.” Ha! He had special names for each of us, and he taught us, actually, to pay attention. Thank you, Major Ferguson! You blessed us!

I went to college thinking I wanted to be a jazz piano player. I was going to play music the rest of my life. But God changed that, too, and I ended up trying to become a priest in the Episcopal Church. They told me, in those days, that I was too young. But I persisted.

And so, I started ministry in a church up in Marietta, when I was around 26 years old. My lovely wife was even younger. Both of us had been raised to be ever so polite, and so we made a great impression on the Episcopal parish to which I had been assigned. Parishes still love young couples, especially polite ones, and especially when one part of the couple is the Assistant Rector.

We were invited everywhere for dinners, and we courageously sallied forth, rarely knowing who our hosts would be, what kind of setting it would be, or who else would be there. The agenda was simply, “Let’s get to know the young priest and his wife.” Lovely. It’s still at the heart of parish ministry.

Our hosts were elderly, and they asked if we could have an early dinner. Would 4:30 p.m. be too early? No, 4:30 p.m. is not too early for us. We immediately noticed that the average age of the five other couples there was a number too high for me to count. We could have been their great grand-children.

The other guests and our hosts were even more polite than my wife and me. They asked if we wanted something to drink, and I eagerly accepted. I thought that, if 4:30 was too early for a cocktail, maybe a small glass of wine would be nice. They didn’t offer me a choice. We got prune juice. Actually, I had never had prune juice before, and it wasn’t bad.

Our hostess talked incessantly, and with an unfortunate tone that reminded me of a hen being chased around the chicken coop. Like many a Southern hostess I have known, she rarely sat down, thinking that she had to be constantly moving in order to be gracious (not true!). Actually, the house was quite small, and she liked yelling to us—or talking to herself—even when she was in the kitchen right beside us. I have politely forgotten what we had to eat before dinner. I remember the conversation revolved around coin collections.

Suddenly, we heard the voice of our hostess rise to an even more elevated pitch. Something bright in the kitchen caught my eye. Yes, something was definitely on fire. She had been preparing hundreds of special dishes for us—well, at least 15—several with wicker containers for the glass casseroles. Her small kitchen had run out of space, her wicker containers were on the stove, and one of them was on fire.

As the young and agile priest, I dashed into the kitchen in order to save the day. After more squawking and maneuvering in the tight space, we got the fire out. The kitchen was smoky, but most of the food was already prepared without having been burned.

So, then began the procession—the long procession around the sideboard (actually two sideboards) laden with delicious Southern goodies. At this point, I must admit that I am not a fan of many Southern goodies. I actually do not like pickles, and at least half the dishes were pickled something or another. The second chapter of every Southern meal always begins, “Have a little more of this, have a little more of that.” I was desperately trying to find something without pickles.

We passed the largest silver casserole around the table while we were sitting, all twelve of us around a table meant for about six. Actually, this silver casserole frame was designed to hold a wicker container and then the glass inside dish; and it didn't quite fit right. In fact, its original wicker holder had burned up. But our hostess pressed forward, even if the glass dish was rattling inside the large silver frame; there was no more wicker basket to hold the glass dish.

I had neglected to notice that I should grasp both the silver frame and the ill-fitting glass casserole dish, at the same time, when it came around. So, when I politely took only the outside silver frame instead, the entire glass inside fell through the frame and smashed my plate to pieces. I was horrified, and I immediately pushed my chair back and stood up to prevent further damage. As I did so, my chair hit the crowded sideboard behind me. Another crash resulted; every plate and dish standing so handsomely on its shelves fell flat—or fell completely off.

Much more squawking and cackling ensued. I was trying to be helpful, but I was rather wedged in between a sideboard, three chairs, a table, and much broken china. It was not a pretty sight for the new young Episcopal priest. Of course, when the clutter and clatter had subsided, we still had to actually partake of the dinner.

And now, for some reason or another, the house had run out of china plates. I will just use a paper plate, I insisted; that would be safer. The hostess would hear nothing of it. I had to eat on her china, or what was left of it. So I used a small dessert plate. Now I had to arrange 15 different items on a four-inch plate. Lovely.

Finally, as the meal started, the very polite woman asked me, the young priest, if I would say the blessing. Yes, she wanted me to bless the gathering and the meal. I looked around and saw the disheveled sideboard, and the crazy chinaware. I saw my puny plate. I still smelled smoke in the air. And she wanted me to bless this mess.

I will never forget it. And I will never be so thankful for a meal to be over than I was for that one to be over.

So, enjoy your meals this Thanksgiving, from the smallest meals to the grandest, no matter what age the guests are, no matter what people sound like, no matter how many pickled things are served, no matter what burns up, no matter what comes crashing down on you, no matter what you have to eat on, no matter how clumsy the local minister is. No matter. The idea is to give thanks. Give thanks. There is always, always, always, something to be thankful for – even if you are giving thanks that it is over!

We can blame, or we can bless. Today, I believe we remember the people who helped, more than we remember the people who blamed.

The little girl was asked by her mother to say the blessing.

Messes happen in this life. There are times we feel stuck. The only way out is to bless. When we feel overwhelmed. When we feel out of control. We can choose to blame or to bless. Blame produces more anxiety, more loss, more franticness. Blessing is the only way out.

The word, “blame” is actually a shortened form of the word, “blaspheme,” to speak evil of something or someone.

I know that our community needs accountability. We all need each other to be accountable. But blame and blasphemy are something else. Those words are related to the word, “accuse.” Did you know, in the Bible, that the word “Satan” actually means “accuse”? Satan is the great Accuser. But, if the word for accuse is basically the same word as Satan, then I believe that the word for “Bless” is the same word as God. In life, we can blame, or we can bless.

Isn't it odd that the weather causes people to act like themselves, only moreso. Or, as the old English ditty goes:

*Whether the weather be mild
or whether the weather be not,
Whether the weather be cold
or whether the weather be hot,
We'll weather the weather
whatever the weather,
Whether we like it or not.*

I think that is our call, too, in this life, no matter what else we think we are headed out to do tomorrow. On that last Tuesday of January, 2014, the citizens of Atlanta, whatever else we thought we were doing that day, we were not being sent out in our cars to curse or to find blame. At our places of work, we were not there simply to make a bigger profit and cut costs. At school, we were not going there just to be bored, or to skip something again. No matter where we were that Tuesday, we were there to bless. No matter how well we could drive, or not drive, we were there to bless.

Tomorrow, you students—and all of us, actually—will be sent out into the world, not to blame, but to bless. We are sent out not to curse, but to save. The ultimate gridlock is to go out into the world looking for someone to blame. The ultimate freedom, the ultimate release, is to bless.

And that is one thing I hope this school, and your parents, and your friends have taught you, no matter what else has occurred. The most important words we learn in life are words of blessing. A teacher says to a student, “I bless you.” A parent says to a child, “I bless you.” A child can even say it to a parent, “I bless you.” I speak something good to you.

That's what a benediction is, literally, in the Latin. A benediction is a “good word.” The degree you receive tomorrow is not simply a record of achievement, of how you've negotiated the twists and turns and crashes of life. It is not a record of what you have attended and what you have skipped.

Your degree tomorrow is a license. Your degree gives you the authority to speak good words to the world, to bless rather than to blame. The world needs you now; the world that blessing.

AMEN.