2015 Baccalaureate Mass Homily

Paul Harman S.J.
College of the Holy Cross

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Rev. Paul Harman, S.J., Vice President for Mission
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Acts 15:7-21; Ps. 96; John 15:9-13

On April 26th the whole world learned that Pope Francis had instructed some newly ordained priests in Rome not to give boring homilies. “Take care,” he told them, “that your homilies arrive directly in people’s hearts because they flow from your heart, because what you tell them is what you have in your heart.” [1] (Notice, the Pope said nothing about the length of homilies!!) Here is what is in my heart this afternoon and I will be brief.

Mark Nepo lives in Brooklyn, New York and is a philosopher, a poet, and a cancer survivor. One of his poems celebrates a friend on his 94th birthday. Nepo writes:

They say that miners in South America strap small lamps around their chest, that this works better than the light coming from the center of your head.
They say the head can be fooled, but the heart can’t turn without the body. This makes me think of you digging your way through your long life, lighting everything with your heart.

Is it any wonder that what you touch, including us, glows.[2]

Nepo’s poem reminds me that, all through my life, it has been my privilege to know men and women who light up everything around them with their hearts. These people are from all walks of life. They are deeply and astonishingly good and loving and forgiving. They listen well. They make other people feel valued and blessed. They laugh at themselves a lot and never seem to give a thought to the wonderful things they are doing. They are profoundly honest about their own sins and weaknesses. They are humble. As the poet observes, “Is it any wonder that what they touch, including us, glows?” So what is their secret? Their secret, it seems, to me, is how they understand their vocation in life. Such people are not inclined to ask themselves: “What do I want to do with my life?” Instead, maybe because of the light shining inside them, their question is, “how is God inviting me to live my life?” Did you catch any of the reading from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians? This may be one of the most beautiful passages in the whole Bible and one commentator on the text has written: “It is a word to return to, to rest upon, to rejoice in, and not least, to enjoy. It should have been put to great music long before now.”[3]

Listen:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.

That prayer challenges us to remake our understanding of what it means to choose and be chosen. It says human beings choose, yes, but God also chooses. It says God did not first choose us when we went to church, or when we were baptized, or confirmed, or when we graduated from Holy Cross. God chose and loved each one of us even before the creation of the universe.
God chooses us not because we are deserving and not in spite of our being undeserving. The profound truth is that God simply loves us, calls us and chooses us. We are chosen because God delights in the whole of creation, and especially in human beings.
God chooses to look upon you and me, to call us, to draw close to us with Love. The question, then, is, how do we go about choosing the direction of our lives?

I am told that around Commencement time bookstores and Amazon.com see a spike in the sales of the Dr. Seuss book, Oh, the Places You’ll Go. Some among you may already have a copy and can recite the familiar lines:

Will you succeed? Yes, you will indeed. 98 ¾% guaranteed.[4]

We all like to imagine ourselves as independent agents, going forth on a self-directed journey, free to go where we will, do what we want, and choose what we wish. We like it when people tell us to be true to ourselves, to follow our passions, to be confident of success. But here’s the problem: that way of imagining things starts with self and ends with self.
As I said, the people who light up everything with their hearts conceive the meaning of vocation differently. They are more inclined to a definition such as that given by the Protestant theologian, Frederick Buechner, who says “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.”[5]
“Dear Class of 2015: Jesus, in today’s Gospel reading, promises us the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit who “will remain with you forever and dwell in you.” It is the Spirit who lights the lamp in people’s hearts. So now you know. God’s Spirit is contagious. Hang around with people who are Spirit-filled, people “who want to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty, people who invite others to a delicious banquet,[6]” (as Pope Francis says); people who “love to love to love ya” (as my brother Jesuit, Keith Maczkiewicz, likes to say). Stay in the company of such people and you will make your way on Earth by the light shining from your hearts. 98 ¾% guaranteed! God bless you!