

# “The Ministry of Divine Words”

2 Peter 1:1-11

It is my pleasure to be in attendance today at the 63rd Commencement celebration. I've been to more than a few of these over the years and never grow tired of the event or weary of the significance of the words, movements and symbols associated with seminary graduation. I attended my first NTS graduation 59 years ago, when my father graduated from here. I was prenatal at the time, but here nonetheless. My next seminary graduation was my own in 1976. I confess that I don't remember much about the 1951 or 1976 ceremonies. From 1985 (the year I came to interview with the Board of Trustees for a faculty position on commencement weekend) through 2005 my perfect attendance record was intact, though my memories of each may not be. Since leaving the Seminary community I've been to more NTS commencements than I've missed so this really does feel like home.

More than being pleased to be here today, I am honored to address the Class of 2010. Being a commencement speaker is a privilege few are given. I am fully aware that the prospect of hearing my comments is not the reason you are here this afternoon. You and your family have come this afternoon to hear your name announced, to walk across the platform receiving congratulations along the way and then receiving your graduate hood, signifying the completion of your degree program. So as honored as I am to speak, that honor is tempered by the reality that you may or may not remember who spoke and you most certainly will remember little to nothing of what I will say. That reality does not diminish the importance of my task, nor has it limited my reflection on what I want to say to you and why.

My current assignment takes me often to pastoral leadership retreats to bring greetings and report on behalf of the university where I serve. Sometimes I know who the speaker will be and sometimes I don't. A few weeks ago, I arrived at one such retreat and opened the program pamphlet to the pleasant discovery that the speaker was a noted Wesleyan-Holiness theologian who retired from his teaching position a few years ago. Nancy often waits for this moment of revelation to assess my enthusiasm or dread, depending on the identity of the speaker. That day she took notice of my obvious joy.

Five minutes into the speaker's presentation I heard the words “*epistemological*,” “*eschatological*,” and “*soteriological*.” I turned to Nancy and said with a smile, “I'm home!” If he would have uttered “*ecclesiological*,” “*pneumatological*,” and “*perichoresis*” I might have looked toward the eastern sky to await my imminent rapture.

These theological words are the native language of the land of your theological education. They are robust with depth and meaning. They are like open doors and windows of a mansion inviting you in to explore its passageways, courtyards and regal halls of the concepts and realities they represent. When you were new to this land of theological education, be it at NTS or some other institution, you may have wondered why this native language needed to be so obtuse and insulated from the ordinary words the rest of the church and the world speak. Some of you wore out your theological dictionary your first semester trying to figure out what these people were saying!

I trust that, in time, you grew familiar with the native language and began to incorporate these words into your theological conversations, not to impress anyone (particularly since most everyone else spoke the language as well or better than you did). No, you began to speak these words because they describe the realities with greater clarity, deeper intensity and richer texture than most ordinary words ever could. In time, you came to understand the treasures of truth wrapped inside them. In time, you began to speak these words with ease while being fully aware that exploring the measure of their meaning was, and remains, anything but easy.

But what happens to this language now? What will you do with these words now that most of you are leaving to pursue arenas of ministry where this native language of theological education will not be spoken with any regularity? Will it be like that modern language class you took in high school or college whose vocabulary and grammar vacated your memory immediately after you stopped using it? Will the expanse and depth of these words grow narrow and irrelevant to most of what you will say and do on a daily basis? Will you have to abandon this native language so as not to appear arrogant or condescending to those who don't know its meaning or speak that way?

I have almost bad and very good news for you this afternoon. The almost bad news is that most of you won't be using this language much in conversation. People within the sphere of your spiritual influence will be more annoyed than impressed if you season your speech with "*epistemological*" or "*eschatological*" or "*ecclesiological*" or most any other "*ological*" you come up with. This language will be for your reading, your study, your continuing education and conversation with ministry colleagues for whom this language communicates the same clarity, intensity and texture you find in it. That's the almost bad news.

The good news is that though you may not get to use these technical theological words in the daily flow of ministry, you are called to "speak" the truths the words represent into the world and particularly into the lives of the people and parishes where you serve. You will have the opportunity to herald the truth of these words not as theological concepts but as theological realities. This is one of the grand privileges and awesome responsibilities of ministry. This is the ministry of divine words.

Let me say it as plainly as I can. You get to speak for God. You get to say "God words," most of them warm and inviting, a few of them fearful and difficult, all of them seasoned with God's immeasurable grace and limitless love.

- You get to speak realities like Peter did in the text read earlier ... "Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord."
- You get to speak divine realities as Jesus did when he said to the paralyzed man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."
- You are privileged to speak the reality of God's presence by the shout of "Glory" or the whisper of "Immanuel ... God with us."
- You are blessed to speak as Jesus did as he sat at Zacchaeus' table, "Today salvation has come to this house."
- You are called to speak to all seeking the place where divine wisdom governs, where perfect love is the law and mercy abounds that the kingdom of God isn't

“here” or “there,” as if it were established by military coup or popular vote, you are called to speak, “the Kingdom of God is in your midst.”

- You are ordained to say as you lift the bread and raise the cup of the Eucharist, “the Body of Christ, broken for you ... the Cup of the New Covenant poured out for you.”
- You have the opportunity to pray boldly with Paul, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.”

But the power of the words will not be in your eloquence or intellect, no matter how smooth your speech or keen your mind may be. The power of these words has little to do with you. The power is in their source. Peter put it this way at the end of the chapter which was read, “prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). The words are not just divinely inspired. They are not just divinely authorized. They are divine words spoken by the one ...

- who called creation into being with his word and by whose word all things are held together;
- who with a word rebuked the wind and calmed the sea;
- who announced forgiveness by the authority of his word;
- whose word healed the sick and raised the dead.
- who said “follow me,” and extended the grace to do so;
- who, into the midst of fearful followers, said “Peace be with you” and with his breath, “Receive the Holy Spirit;”
- who said, “Go ... and I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

These are words spoken by the one who has given us his word in times past through the prophets and in many other ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, the eternal Word” (Hebrews 1:1, John 1:1).

These words you are called to speak are “God words” that do more than describe or define theological truths. The words we speak for God declare their reality. What a grand privilege and awesome responsibility we have in this “Ministry of Divine Words!” Humbly, we must say with the Apostle, “Who is equal to such a task?” (2 Corinthians 2:16b). But this is our task. This ministry is our calling.

I challenge you to live up to the task, to walk worthy of the calling to which you are called. Speak divine words with the authority of the God who made you, the grace of Christ who calls you and the power of the Spirit who fills you. The world where you serve is not hungry for your theological vocabulary with its analyses. They are starving for the realities your theological vocabulary represents. They are desperate for a divine word.

- Into a world where productivity reigns and time is money, whether it be Wall Street and Church Street ... speak the divine word of “Sabbath”;
- Into a world of chaos and conflict between people, parties, tribes and nations ... speak the divine word of “Peace and Reconciliation”;

- Into a world where condemnation, retribution and guilt echo in our hearts and homes ... speak the divine word of “Forgiveness” and “Redemption”;
- Into a world of calculated partisanship, measured cooperation, and strategic exclusion ... speak the divine word of “Love for friends and enemies alike”;
- Into a world where sin abounds with soiled, polluted, corrupted lives and systems ... speak the divine Good News “that grace abounds even more”;
- Into a world of lost and broken people and things ... speak the divine words that God has come in Christ “to seek and to save what was lost”;
- Into a world where death seems to have the final say ... speak the words of a risen Savior, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Congratulations on the achievement of a graduate theological degree. You deserve our admiration and praise. But do not celebrate too long for there is much to do and much to say. You have been called to the grand privilege and awesome responsibility of the “Ministry of Divine Words.”

It is appropriate that I leave with this word:

“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever, Amen.”

—Hebrews 13:20-21