

To Fred Kraegel, chair of this highly regarded Board of Directors; to President Heckler, Provost Schwehn, and the distinguished faculty, who in 90 days will be my colleagues: faculty, nothing like those stereotypically described by W. H. Auden as professors who “talk in someone else’s sleep;” to all the stellar staff here, my dearly loved wife’s soon-to-be colleagues; to family members and friends dressed in your best cheering voices today; to all the dreamers who thought they’d never live see May 19, 2013; to all Facebook friends, Instagram groupies, the Twitter types who I hope are tweeting even as I’m speaking:

Thank you graduates, for giving us front-row seats to the first day of your fabulous future. I promise to talk for less than 11 more minutes. (That’s usually an applause line!)

Today I will try to make a quick case for the criticality of Christian values in public and professional life—values, which like a golden (and brown) strand have been interwoven through the fabric of your life here at VU. As you sit with sanguine expectations today, you graduates know how the idea of values, as in, say, “family values,” can be loaded with all sorts of rightwing political freight and leftwing politically-correct baggage, but I believe that the bottom-line unifying value of so-called Christian values is the non-negotiable ethic that places value on every single human person from the womb to the tomb, which means how we treat *all* people matters in the eyes of God.

It’s easy to value the kind of people who go on mission trips to rebuild Haiti. It’s a bit more difficult when they’re “that guy” at 1 a.m. singing along

off-key to Jay-Z and JT: “As long as I got my suit and tie.” It’s easy when they take the basketball team to the big dance; it’s a bit more difficult when they’re that bossy-pants RA who has convinced herself that she’s the new sheriff in town.

We struggle to value people whom we can’t see, like Bangladeshi clothing workers making pennies so that we can chase cheaper goods. I do personally struggle to value the humanity of shooters in Newtown or Columbine, or of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the dead Boston Bomber, whose earthly remains, for a time, no cemetery would take. But *not* valuing the humanity of enemies or those who do evil diminishes the humanity of all of us and is inconsistent with Christian values.

So we have a painfully divided world that desperately needs your help, graduates, in dealing with DIVERSITY:

Different

Individuals

Valuing

Each other

Regardless of

Skin tone,

Identity,

Talent, or

Years,

valuing people as people whether or not they walk like us, or talk like us, or make the same kind of money we make, or possess handicaps we consider grotesque. I see you as leaders who aren’t fake and aren’t afraid. Possessing

a backbone of faith, your generation has more practice in dealing with diversity than we do, and we need your expertise, please.

While you were in college there were more non-whites than whites born in the USA. While some people—even in this room—see this as a crisis, you see diversity as an opportunity. And while I categorically reject getting stuck in past pain, neither should we deny the past: “Can’t escape the past,” DiCaprio’s *Gatsby* says. Or the fact that some of us still suffer the residue of racist, sexist, and homophobic prejudice!

I dream that your generation will stretch us to get over it. Enough is enough! People are people! Women are actually fully human. Everyone is made in the image of God. Stretch us, graduates.

But hear me clearly, there’s also something I’m not convinced you yet get. That is, how *not* normal, from a global perspective, are the opportunities *and* the obligations in front of you. Here’s what I mean—graduates, watch this:

Parents and others in the room: this is voluntary; you don’t have to play if you don’t want to. Raise your hand if you’re 49 years of age or older. (My hand’s up, I turned 50 in January.) In most of the places where my organization works, among the poorest of the poor, we, with our hands up, are already dead. Poverty, lack of clean water, and disease abbreviate life. Our lives are not normal.

Now, raise your hands again—just in your minds this time, not for others to see—if you earn just \$38,000 a year or more. Those with their hands up are among the world’s richest *one* percent. Being born in the USA is like winning first prize in the lottery of life. I believe we have a divine obligation in the world—those to whom much is given.

I wasn’t born here, but I got here as quickly as I could, from Jamaica to Canada to the USA. I’m actually a double immigrant—thanks for letting me in. I hope I haven’t messed up the United States of America (as much as we’ve all messed up immigration reform). But may I tell you about the day I became black...

I was 18 years old and arrived in the US as a student on a certain college campus (not this one) and had to fill out the mandatory campus census information. The first box under ethnicity was “black.” My father is very black; he’s Afro-Jamaican and very proud, so I checked that box. The next was “white.” My mother is a very white, red-haired Scottish highlander, almost see-through white, so I checked that box. Next “Spanish-surnamed,” that’s what they called Hispanic back then. Nunes: we’ve traced back our Portuguese family-name, it’s Sephardic Jewish, which wasn’t on the form. Spanish-surnamed, close enough. So I checked that box. Bottom was “International Student.” Jamaican born, Canadian raised, living in the US—I checked that box.

The next day the registrar, with a very tightly tied bowtie said, “You can’t be all these things. You’re skewing my data; please pick just one thing.”

Well why can't I just be the way God made me? You see, that was before being hybrid was cool, before we had a president, before we hybrids had a car named after us. So that day I picked being "black." I started a black student organization on campus, all seven of us (it was a Lutheran college in the 1980s). We even made my roommate, your campus pastor, Jim Wetzstein, an honorary black.

But we've got a long way to go to respect all diversity. Martin Luther King once stated that people *hate* you because they *fear* you and they fear you because they don't *know* you, and what makes it worse is they think they know you. You, graduates know better. We are failing as a nation and we need your generation!

In fact, that's the only point I really want to make today. I am calling you, graduates, to call us all to account for the false ways we have taken the safe but cowardly path of pitting people against other people. There is *one* race, it's called human—check the science of the Mitochondrial Eve. The starting point of Christian values is to value all people as made in the image of God at every age and stage of life.

Harry Emerson Fosdick penned a poem that is a hymn¹ that is my prayer for us today:

Curb your children's warring madness
Bend our pride to your control
Shame our wanton selfish gladness

Fosdick, Harry Emerson. "God of Grace and God of Glory" (No. 850) in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

Rich in things but poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom,
grant us courage
for the facing of these days.

Or in the Augustinian words President Heckler used in my introduction,
“Hope has two beautiful daughters.” Grant us hope, grant us anger, grant us
courage for the facing of these days.

You go, graduates! You go! You go into a wonderful world! Now let's all go
and make it better in Jesus! Thank you.