

**Prayer of the Day:** We thank you, dear God, for all the ways, as with a mother's tender hand, you have led us through the ages and through the stages of our life. You call us here to be the mother church. Astound us again, O God, with the way you moved your people in those first years after Jesus was raised. Strengthen us with such a powerful presence of Christ among us that we listen for your voice, lead your people in our time and place, and fulfill your love for all creation, in the name of Christ our Lord.

***There Is No More Important Job***

Acts 16:9-15; Philippians 4:2-9

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The simplest way to say it is this (writes Benjamin Carson): I believe in my mother. My belief began when I was just a kid and dreamed of becoming a doctor. My mother was a domestic. Through her work, she observed that successful people spent a lot more time reading than they did watching television. So she announced that my brother and I could only watch two or three preselected TV programs during the week. With our free time, we had to read two books each from the Detroit Public Library and submit to her written book reports. She would mark them up with check marks and highlights. Years later we realized her marks were a ruse. My mother was illiterate; she had only received a third-grade education. Although we had no money, between the covers of those books I could go anywhere, do anything, and be anybody. (B. Carson, in *This I Believe*, 28-30)

To go anywhere and do anything in real life we need resources – intellect, imagination and dreams, money, talents and effort, and something else even more important that makes our use of these resources come alive. Today we celebrate accomplishments – high school graduation! We commend our youth for their hard work in class and extracurricular activities.

And today we celebrate our mothers who help to make it all possible. We remember all the love we received, all the nurturing that helped us grow into the people we are, with the gifts we have to offer. Because don't we know that just having some kind of talent, ingenuity, possibility isn't enough? How will we use these gifts for good or ill – in self-centered ways or in service of others? And at heart, of course, that's a question for faith – namely seeing in ourselves and in our purposes the image of God's love. Some call this resource "self-esteem;" this growth "self-actualization." And it is. Our faith sees it as how we were created in the grace of God. How that grace transforms us when life is less than perfect. We recognize the gifts of goodness we have received as the image of God. And we respond with gratitude, giving something back in our relationships with others. Something like the eternal chain of mothers at their best, passing on love one to another.

Something like we see, at its best, in the "mother church" – passing on grace one person, one generation to another and coming together to create the world as God dreams it could be. We all are God's children nourished by the church as we grow to maturity in Christ. As part of who we become and whatever job we do, God empowers us to serve together here – to nurture, challenge, protect, and teach as the mother church.

Lydia was an early mother of the church. Luke tells us she enjoyed an important job trading purple cloth – a commodity for the wealthy. In a bustling city about the size of Marshall, a commercial center and seat of Roman power, that must have meant she was politically well-connected, accustomed to dealing with the elite “important” class of citizens, if not one herself. Luke’s point is that Lydia fully controls her life – an extraordinary accomplishment in a society where men dominate positions of commercial, political, religious, familial authority. And Lydia gives up that control to be baptized; to submit her life to God and others. She opens her home as the base for Paul’s mission in that place. She exemplifies how God works through all of us patrons and patronesses of the mother church – to offer our human gifts, our spiritual sponsorship, our material stewardship so God’s work among us might grow. Again not unlike how our mothers, at their best, shone the Light, the Joy, the Peace inside them so that we might find the same goodness reflected in us.

Friends, if there is a common thread in this day for graduates and for mothers, this day in this season of Easter when we remember the beginning of the church, maybe that thread is the longing we all have for meaning and purpose in life. We want to do something important. We may feel that longing more strongly at particular times and places of life. But it really never leaves us does it, no matter how young or old, whatever the circumstances we face?

It’s something deeply personal that is fulfilled in relationship with others. That’s what Paul found with Lydia and the other women gathered by the river that day. That’s what people near us are waiting to find, to hear in a word from God. Trouble is, like Paul, sometimes what we want, where we think we should go isn’t always right with God’s vision for us and our world. Just before Paul’s vision from God he had been wandering quite unsuccessfully. He needed guidance clearer than his own cloudy plans and priorities.

When I entered high school, [Benjamin Carson continues] I was an A-student, but not for long. I wanted the fancy clothes. I wanted to hang out with the guys. I went from being an A-student to a B-student to a C-student, but I didn’t care. I was getting the high fives and the low fives and the pats on the back. I was cool. One night my mother came home from working her multiple jobs, and I complained about not having enough Italian knit shirts. She said, “Okay, I’ll give you all the money I make this week scrubbing floors and cleaning bathrooms, and you can buy the family food and pay the bills. With everything left over, you can have all the Italian knit shirts you want.” I was very pleased with that arrangement, but once I got through allocating money, there was nothing left. I realized my mother was a financial genius to be able to keep a roof over our heads and any kind of food on the table, much less buy clothes. I also realized that immediate gratification wasn’t going to get me anywhere. (*ibid.*)

By the grace of God, in life and in church we come to moments of clarity. Sometimes they are glimpses of tough circumstances we haven’t seen or appreciated in fullness before. We overcome challenges in our school work. We try some activity that doesn’t go so well that helps point us where we can be really successful and fulfilled.

And then often when we have achieved some milestone, like graduation, we look ahead to future plans and possibilities. We consider how to continue growing through whatever is yet to come, with whatever goodness has been. They are times of mixed emotion ... maybe

something like commencement – which always felt to me like the end. Then one day I was surprised to learn it actually means the beginning. In truth, life is always filled with little endings and beginnings, and larger ones that really capture our attention, call forth our action. In a way, it is the reality of every moment of every day.

Something like the word “Rejoice” that Paul uses in his letter. That same word can also mean “farewell.” Joyful celebration of the past and the present, tinged with sadness knowing we’re about to start a new journey in life. Something like high school graduation. Something like what every mother must face at points in life when children extend their wings and leave the nest.

Whatever the landmark moment of moving out, I’ve sensed the reality as a parent that this experience happens all the time: from the first moment of toddler separation anxiety to the first day of school or summer camp and so many little expressions of independence along the way. It is healthy and necessary growth made by possible by all the little ways we give and receive God’s love. They are times of fun activity. They are little lessons learned. They are hurts forgiven. They are hopes and dreams nourished. It is a steady presence – in a way God’s presence – that guides wise choices and goodness in everyday routines. It is the Way, Truth and Life of joy and peace given to us in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s purpose for the letter to the Philippians was ostensibly to commend Epaphroditus to them (to justify the fact that he didn’t stay with Paul as they may have wished). It really feels as though he’s trying to commend them all to one another. Rejoice in the Lord always, he writes. And the rest of this section describes what that joy-filled life looks like. Be known by gentleness – generosity toward others, magnanimity. It creates peace ... a sense of total well-being. Free from anxiety. And then in that long list – whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, commendable, worthy of praise – he gives advice that seems relevant to our all too often cynical and negative and critical age. Think about these things he urges. Because you see, friends, that’s the grace that gives life in the end, far more than some of those e-mails we receive or conversations we find ourselves a part of sometimes.

Paul writes from prison. So it’s not like he’s got some naïve, blissful view of the world disconnected from reality. Still, I think he’s trying to say that there’s something deeper, more powerful, more important in life than all of that confinement, negativity and loss. That’s what God tries to tell us in the resurrection of Christ. Paul encourages the people in the way of resurrection life together that serves and represents the presence of Christ in the world; and that cultivates a deep and abiding sense of peace. That’s our purpose whatever our day job. Be of the same mind he appeals to two other women leaders of that church who apparently had some disagreement. Be of the same mind he said just a few lines earlier ... the same mind as Christ Jesus.

That’s what we face friends as remember our mothers. Surely they weren’t always perfect. Did they really always know best?! Find the goodness, and speak of it with grace. That’s what we face, friends, as we try to be parents of our pets and children; as we try to be together the mother church; as we try to love our world. We will all too often see imperfections, things

that could frustrate, confuse, anger ... or amuse. We have a choice about how to respond. Rejoice in the Lord, Paul says, and again I will say, Rejoice!

That's what we're here to celebrate with graduates today. That's what we all know in our way in these weeks ahead when we will say farewell. In the spirit of commencement, today we seek inspiration for continued goodness. In and through all we do, remember the loving purposes of God we gratefully receive and give back are what's really most important and most powerful in our world.

I went back to my studies and became an A-student again, and eventually fulfilled my dream, [concludes Dr. Benjamin Carson.] He is director of pediatric neurosurgery at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center. He specializes in separating conjoined twins and doing brain surgery to control seizures. A scholarship fund Carson founded has helped some 1,700 students through college. Over the years, he writes, my mother's steadfast faith in God has inspired me, particularly when I had to perform extremely difficult surgical procedures or when I found myself faced with my own medical scare. A few years ago I discovered I had a very aggressive form of prostate cancer; I was told it might have spread to my spine. My mother was steadfast in her faith in God. She never worried. She said that God was not through with me yet; there was no way that this was going to be a major problem. The abnormality in my spine turned out to be benign; I was able to have surgery and am cured. My story is really my mother's story—a woman with little formal education or worldly goods who used her position as a parent to change the lives of many people around the globe. There is no more important job than parenting. (*ibid.*)

Thanks be to God. Amen.