

Stones of Hope

The Graduate Theological Foundation

Commencement Address

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First, I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Kendra Clayton, the Board of Directors of the Graduate Theological Foundation, the faculty, students and administration, for the very kind invitation to share with you on this momentous occasion. It is quite an honor for me to return to this institution that has been one of my intellectual homes – an institution where I was a graduate student, and where I have been privileged to serve as a part of the faculty over the past several years.

And especially to the graduates of the 2015 class of the Graduate Theological Foundation, I offer words of congratulations and blessing to you, your families and the places you serve.

I am reminded of a portion of a simple poem by the great American poet Langston Hughes that encourages us to -

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow. (“Dreams”)

It is my sense that one of the things that all people of faith and conscious wrestle with, and seek to hold to - in any variety of traditions, perspectives, persuasions, or systems of belief – including those of the Abrahamic faith traditions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity - is the matter of hope. The yearning to comprehend, and appropriate hope is something that we all hold in common.

These are days of tremendous change and challenge in our world. From the collapse of

economies that affect all of us – to the wars that are now being fought in various places across the globe - to natural catastrophe – to the proliferation of violence that affects many people and communities across America and the world, these are days of unprecedented change and challenge.

And amidst this, there is yet this yearning for hope among us. Hope is what German theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote about when he wrote – “Hope alone is to be called “realistic” because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught. Hope does not take things as they happen to stand or to lie, but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change.” (*A Theology of Hope*)

In one of his sermons, "The Meaning of Hope," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. defined hope as that quality which is "necessary for life." King asserted that hope was to be viewed as "animated and under girded by faith and love." In his mind, if you had hope, you had faith in something. Thus, for him, hope shares the belief that "all reality hinges on moral foundations." Hope was, for King, the refusal to give up "despite overwhelming odds."

Indeed hope is not easily attained to. In his book *Hope on a Tightrope*, philosopher Cornel West cautions against a false sense of security in hope, yet unborn. He points out that real hope is grounded in a particularly messy struggle and it can be betrayed by naive projections of a better future that ignore the necessity of doing real work. For West, real hope is closely connected to attributes like courage, faith, freedom and wisdom. It comes out of a context of struggle, and points to a future filled with the possibilities of promise and progress.

The hope that Moltmann, King, and West wrote of is that which would beckon us to love everybody – both our enemies and allies. This hope would help us to see that we can (and must) resist giving up on one another because our lives together are animated by the belief that we share in a common destiny. In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech delivered in our Nation’s Capital in the summer of 1963, King shared that a part of his dream was that we would be able “to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.”

What real hope does is it moves us ever closer toward Dr. King’s notion of *Beloved Community*. It is a hope that beckons us to dream of a better world. Hope for a better future is ultimately rooted grounded in our shared sense that there is real potential for each of us to

change the world. Perhaps this is what Mohandas Gandhi meant when he encouraged those of his day to “be the change that you want to see in the world.”

Every few years, I have the privilege of leading a group of scholars from Wesley Theological Seminary in a doctoral immersion course that retraces many of the steps of the American Civil Rights movement in Alabama. I journeyed with one group this past winter, and will journey with another group of students this August.

The group in January was typical of others with which I have worked over the years. We reflected much of the diversity of society today. We were Hispanic, Native American and Asian, white and black, female and male, and from multiple faith traditions. As we traveled, we prayed, sang, and shared our thoughts together. We cried together on occasion, and we rejoiced together.

As we traveled in January, my memory harkened back to one of our trips several years ago, where Dr. Eileen Guenther, a professor at Wesley Seminary who was a part of that earlier study group, offered that it was a spiritual song by many choirs, “I’m Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table,” that played in her head throughout our experience (see *The American Organist*, November 2008). Dr. Guenther said that she thought about the variety of tables that we encountered as we traveled through Alabama (which at a time had been known as the cradle of the confederacy and as a bastion of racial segregation in America):

- Lunch counters of restaurants where all had not been welcome (in the past);
- The dining room table in the parsonage of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in Montgomery, where we were told, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed;
- The kitchen table of the same parsonage where Dr. King searched his soul and felt God telling him to press on with his work;
- The tables at which the people at 16th Street Baptist Church served us lunch, tables placed adjacent to the site of the tragic bombing on September 15, 1963 that killed four young girls;
- The tables around which members of our group gathered to share stories as victims of discrimination, of their courageous work in the Civil Rights movement

(and other freedom and human rights movements), and their lament over a lack of awareness of what was going on at that time in America's history.

At the conclusion of each of our doctoral immersions in Alabama, I am invariably struck by how far we as a society have come - and yet how far we have to go. There is a real sense of hope – and the presence of God in our small, diverse groups - as together we choose to be the *Beloved Community* with one another. We realize that it would not have been possible 40 years prior for 15-25 people of faith from diverse backgrounds to travel in relative peace and safety throughout Alabama. For me, these are real signs of the stones of hope hewn out of the mountains of despair among us.

And so wherever we find ourselves in the world, and however we seek to find hope in the living of these days, we are beckoned to heed, again the poetic words of Langston Hughes –

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly. (“Dreams”)