

“Lessons for Life”
Baccalaureate Service
By Rev. Ernie Forrester
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
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Let me say right off how proud I am to be standing before you this morning. I know you wanted Andy to be here, and I know he wanted to be here too. I wanted him to be here, but thanks for letting me pinch hit!

Someone asked me how appropriate I thought this was, getting a chance to speak to my last class before moving on to my new job. I want to remind the church of the great blessing I have been given. Because of Smoke Rise I have the opportunity, at least for a time, to stay in the church where God has called me and have a part (be it ever so small) in raising our students. So let me say publicly to the church how very blessed I feel to serve a church which has shown such warmth and affirmation toward me and my family. I have not had the chance in such a setting to say to you how grateful I am to you for the faith you have shown in me. Thank you!

There are many directions we could go today, and for those of you who do not know this class, you have no idea how appropriate it would be to go in several directions at one time this morning! That is the personality of this class, and has been from the first day they set foot in the 6th grade. It has truly been one of the most consistent classes I have ever had. In fact I discovered a little ditty that described this class for me. Now try to remember this is them talking . . . This is what I hear them saying when I look into their faces.

We, the unwilling, let by the unknowing, have been doing so much with so little for so long, we are now capable of doing anything with nothing!

So my initial thought is to impart some great wisdom for you and tell you truths that will make your life fuller and richer. I actually thought of several like –

If you change lines (or traffic lanes), the one you were in will always move faster than the one you are in now (works every time).

The probability of meeting someone you know increases dramatically when you are with someone you don't want to be seen with.

The severity of the itch is inversely proportional to the reach.

Anything is possible if you don't know what you are talking about.

The truth is you probably already know some of these and they won't take us to where we need to go anyway. I'll move on . . .

In case you don't know, Ben Franklin is one of my favorite people. It's not like we hang out or anything, but I enjoy reading about him and in preparing for this Baccalaureate address, I discovered a comment made by Ben Franklin. He said: "Here comes the orator with his flood of words and his drop of wisdom."

I promise not to flood you with words. Whether I leave you with a drop of wisdom is for you to judge. You already know my favorite saying about education – Education is going from cocksure ignorance to thoughtful uncertainty. (pause) I know you don't get it, so just think about it!

In 1855, an unknown poet named Walt Whitman published a book called *Leaves of Grass*. Reading the book in Boston, Ralph Waldo Emerson responded with one of the most famous tributes in American literary history: "I greet you," Emerson wrote to Whitman, "at the beginning of a great career."

Today, as I have the privilege of speaking to you, I want to take Emerson's words as my own: I greet you all at the beginning of your great careers. You will graduate in a few days and be on your way.

This is an occasion for celebration. (I know this is a little odd, but if you are a parent of one of these graduates stand. If you are a family member here today; If you are a friend; If you taught one of these in a GA, RA, or any other mission group; If you taught one in Sunday School; If you taught them in public or private school, would you stand)? Your parents and friends and church have come together in a joyful act of congratulation. At the same time, this is also an occasion for more serious reflection.

You will graduate in a world starkly different, in many ways, from the one in which I graduated. It's far more interconnected. Information moves dramatically faster. The decision cycle is vastly shorter. People around the world are more closely linked than ever before. Decisions made in one capital can be felt across the globe instantly.

Global markets and technology have brought us together as never before. Today we must deal with immense problems in other areas that begin in one nation but affect many others. Many of these are problems that no single nation can solve: Environmental problems, such as destruction of the rain forest that can damage the atmosphere of the entire globe, or acid rain. Health problems, such as the startling incidence of HIV in the some populations of the world that can spread so readily in an era of jet planes. And terrorism, nourished by despair in one country, with its consequences felt around the world.

Whether we meet these challenges of interdependence, and of the tension that exists between the sovereignty of nations and the need to work together to solve problems that have no borders, will shape the world in which you live.

That is not where we are headed this morning, but those are important issues and will have to be dealt with in your lifetime. While they are important, so are you, and I want to focus on you this morning.

What I need you to hear this morning is the message I want you to take with you as you leave Smoke Rise and go off to college, the work place, or whatever you do. They are

three very simple principles – To believe in yourself, To hope in the unseen, To give of yourself.

The first:

To believe in yourself.

It is one of the easiest things to say to you, but one of the hardest for you to do. Nevertheless, there are a lot of people here today who believe in you. They have seen potential in you, or recognized a gift of some kind. Probably early on someone said to you, “I believe in you”. It might have been your mom or dad. It may have been a brother or sister, an aunt or uncle, or maybe a grandparent. Someone got you started on the road to good self-esteem.

But somewhere along the way you got side-tracked. Somewhere back there you began to see yourself in a negative way. It might have been when you were picked last for a team. It might have been during adolescents when your body began to change. Or maybe it happened when you began to pay attention to all those commercials that tell you how you should look, what you should eat, how you should dress, how you should feel, who you should be, or the kind of toothpaste you should use, and you realized you were none of those things!

No matter the reason, I want to share with you a word of encouragement from the scripture. It is from Jeremiah 29:11 – “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, ”plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” I know you have heard the adage – “If God is for us, who can be against us” – Well, God IS for you. Because of that I can confidently say to you that one of the best things you can do for you is to Believe In Yourself!

Now the second is a bit more tricky:

To Hope in the Unseen.

Now please understand what I am saying to you. I am not talking about Fear Of The Unknown. Nearly everyone suffers from that. I am talking about hope in what is coming.

I know you have heard the story of Doubting Thomas. Dr. Bob did a great job a few weeks ago of giving us another side of Thomas, making him look much better than what we have been taught all these years, but the premise is still the same. Thomas just wasn't going to believe it unless he saw it for himself.

There are many ways to go from here, so bear with me. I am encouraging you to hope in the unseen, to believe in something you cannot touch . . . YET! You see, you have been given the foundation for this already. It is not new to you. Through your parents and through the teaching of the church you have already gotten a grasp on this concept. Nearly every one of you has experienced some type of personal tragedy or you know someone close to you who has. All of that together is part of the preparation for what lies ahead.

We find it most clearly stated in Hebrews 11:1 – “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” All that has happened to you and all that has been done for you to this point have prepared you for your next step. It is exciting and scary all at the same time, isn’t it?!

I am excited for you, and that leads me to the final point.
To Give of Yourself

In our seven years together we have had many opportunities to give, from the children we sponsored through Compassion International, to our mission trips together – World Changers, House Calls, Mission Connect – to the Disciple Now Saturdays at Clarkston and other places provided to give you a chance to give of yourselves. Basically we have helped train you with that idea in your minds.

When Kathy Dobbins came on as our Education minister, she put up signs all over our church which stated – Every Member a Minister – an idea from First Peter 4:10 – Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others. That has been followed with our statement of purpose to – Give ourselves away.

Yes, you are prepared to give of yourself, and I encourage you to do so. You will have to in many ways in your classes or the jobs you will acquire, but look for more. Make the most of your time by getting out of your comfort zone and meeting folks NOT like you. Get involved with some of the fine groups on your campus that focuses on those with needs. There are so many opportunities.

And when you are home for the summer, pick one of the many mission opportunities Tim Adcox provides through our mission ministry, or help Kelly Denton with VBS – we always need good workers there. I am certain the nursery could use you, so check with Amanda Burton. Sing in the choir with Danny. You get the picture.

In a short time you will be off to a whole new adventure. You are ending one chapter, but you are beginning another. As you go, believe in yourself, hope in the unseen, and give of yourself. It will make the journey so much more exciting.

I want to end with a story I learned in college from my BSU director, Mr. John Caylor. He is the person most responsible for my understanding of the three principles I have shared with you this morning. This is a poem called, “Two Bright Young Frogs”.

Two bright, young frogs from inland bogs had spent the night in drinking.
As morning broke and they awoke, while yet their eyes were blinking,
The farmer’s pail came to the swell and caught them quick as winking.
Ere they could gather scattered senses or breathe a prayer for past offenses,
The farmer fast, hard working man had dumped them in the milkman’s can.
The can filled up, the lid went down, and soon they started off to town.
The frogs soon see that life will stop unless they swim upon the top,

So they swim and they kick, and they kick and they swim, until their weary eyes grow dim.

“Say ole sport”, one frog cried. “I’ve no more kicks in life, why tried it? I wasn’t raised on a milkman’s diet.”

“Tut, tut”, the other replied. “A frog’s not dead until he dies. Keep on kicking, that’s my plan. We may yet see outside this can.”

“No use. No use”, Faint heart replied. Turned up his toes and gently died.

The other frog undaunted still, kept on kicking with a right good will.

Until with joy too great to utter, he found he’d churned a lump of butter.

And climbing on that hunk of grease, he floated around with the greatest of ease.

Now when times are hard and you would frown, don’t give up and go down.

Keep on kicking, no murmur utter. One more kick may bring the butter!

I am so proud of you and I love you. Good luck, and God bless!