
**Baccalaureate Address
May 9, 2008**



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Scripture Readings

- Psalm 104:24-34
- Acts 2:1-21
- John 5:1-9

Seventy-five years ago [today], in the spring of 1933, a short conversation took place between two men at the corner of Foster and Kedzie Avenues.

The elder of the two men was David Nyvall. He was 70 years old on this spring day, and he had been retired for a decade from his life as the first president of North Park College. David Nyvall was widely recognized as an elder statesman—a wise man—and he looked the part. By this time in life his hair and a full beard had not only grayed but turned completely white. He wore narrow wire-rimmed glasses and carried himself in such a way that you knew you should listen when he spoke.

The younger of the two men was Karl Olsson. He was 20 years old, and he was ready that spring to graduate from North Park College. He was a very capable young man. Some decades later he would complete a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago and return to teach English at North Park and then eventually become the fifth president of this college. But on this spring day, Karl Olsson was just like you. He was young and restless. He was full of adventure, but uncertain about where his life would take him or where he should take his life.

On this spring commencement weekend in 1933 Karl Olsson sought out David Nyvall. Karl was graduating from college and he had an important question: What shall I do with my life? He had studied hard; he had taken full advantage of all that college offered; he was interested in his own career, but he also wanted to serve others, to find a way, through his life, to make this world a better place. Yet how to get there was oh so unclear.

So Karl Olsson sought out David Nyvall on the corner of Foster and Kedzie Avenues. Karl asked, What shall I do with my life? And David Nyvall responded, with a single, carefully chosen word. Young Karl asked, What shall I do with my life? And the aging President Nyvall responded: Proceed.

Proceed.

I'm convinced that President Nyvall spoke this single word because he knew the Scriptures which we read minutes ago.

Proceed. From Psalm 104 President Nyvall knew that God is both creator and provider. God is our creator – “when you send forth your spirit,” the psalmist says, “[we] are created.” And God not only creates us, God also provides for us. “When you open your hand,” the psalmist says, “[we] are filled with good things.”

On commencement day, when you want to know what to do with your life, proceed. Proceed, because the God who created us is also the God who provides for us.

President Nyvall also knew the God written of in Acts 2. This is the story of the Day of Pentecost, another time of beginning, one might even call it a commencement. This was a day when God determined to leave a divine mark on the face of the people. And on this day, God’s special mark was a miraculous tongue, the ability to speak in new languages.

The people gathered that day in Jerusalem – people from around the world – were amazed when they heard their language spoken by strangers. And in this amazement they asked one another, “What does this mean?” What does this mean that strangers who have never before spoken in my tongue are now fluent in my language?

Peter took it upon himself to answer this question. What does it mean?

- It means God is present among these people.
- It means God’s spirit is poured upon them.
- It means they are ready to proceed
 - both sons and daughter,
 - both young and old,
 - both those who already have a job and those for whom the job search continues.

Proceed, Peter tells the believers. Prophecy. See visions. Dream dreams. You stand before the Lord’s great and glorious day. Proceed.

Peter recognized this because he was present some months earlier, in this same city, when Jesus met another man. The story is told in John 5, read to us a few minutes ago.

There is a festival in Jerusalem. In our day it might well have been a commencement celebration in Chicago.

During this festival, Jesus comes to a pool surrounded by five porticos. Many are gathered around this pool, resting under these porticos. All of them hope to be healed by the waters of the pool.

On this commencement day, Jesus finds a man – a sick man – resting on his mat under one of the porticos. We don’t know which portico – perhaps the one dedicated to the arts and sciences, perhaps to business, education, music, or nursing. But the man was

there, hoping to be healed, to discover what to do with the rest of his life, on this commencement day.

Jesus asks the man a single question: "Do you want to be made well?"

- Do you want to claim tomorrow as your own?
- Do you want to dream dreams and see visions?
- Do you want to prophesy?

The man offers a lame excuse as a response: Everyone else always beats me to the pool, he says. It's the functional equivalent of saying,

- I only have an undergraduate degree.
- Others got better grades than I did.
- I chose my courses not for what I could learn but because of the time of day they were scheduled.
- Others engaged Chicago as a place to learn, I stayed closer to campus.
- I haven't yet passed my board exams.
- I don't know if I should return home or stay in Chicago.
- I really think I need some time after college to care for myself.

Lame excuses. Fortunately we don't know under which portico Jesus found this man. Had he studied the arts and sciences . . . business . . . nursing . . . music . . . education? Regardless, when Jesus asked him if he wanted to claim tomorrow as his own, the man could only muster a lame excuse.

So Jesus responded to his complacency, to the man's confusion and lack of direction. On that day by the pool Jesus quoted David Nyvall, the first president of North Park University. Proceed, Jesus said. Stand up, take your mat and walk.

What language do you speak? Now prophesy.

What dreams do you dream? Now live.

What visions to you see? Now walk.

Stand up, take your mat, and walk.

Walk right down Foster Avenue into the world for which God has prepared you and into the world God has prepared for you. Years ago God sent his spirit to you and created you. Today God's hands are opened wide before you, ready to care for you in every tomorrow and fill you with all good things.

Tomorrow is commencement day in Chicago. Stand up, take your diploma, and walk.

Proceed.