## Baccalaureate Address Fourth Presbyterian Church – N Michigan Avenue May 13, 2011



David L. Parkyn, President

Old Testament Lesson Nehemiah 9:6-15

Gospel Lessons John 15:12-17 Matthew 25:31-40

Linda and I live in a wonderful home graciously provided by the University. Many of you have been our guests in Hawkinson House. On move-in day five years ago I discovered a delightful object in one of the rooms. It was a sculpture of a grasshopper, carved of wood. (Recently I learned the sculpture is titled Ancient Summer and was carved by North Park's own Professor Neale Murray.) On move-in day I was excited to discover the sculpture because it reminded me of one of my favorite stories from the Hebrew Bible.

We mostly ignore the book of Numbers but it has a couple of really fine stories. In one of these Moses has led a group of God's people out of captivity. They've escaped from slavery and have headed north through a vast wilderness. They survive because God cares for them, but also because Moses organizes them. He takes a census—that's where the book gets its name—and he groups the people into smaller units with leaders assigned for each. He also issues marching orders for their travel across this wilderness. The journey goes well, except that the people don't like the food God provides each morning in the cafeteria.

They dream of reaching Canaan, and eventually come to this land. This is exactly where our Old Testament lesson ended:

For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them. (Nehemiah 9:17)

However, when they arrive on the edge of this land Moses discovers other people are living there already, and it may be that these current inhabitants won't be all that eager to welcome a new group of immigrants. So Moses sends a group of trusted men to spy out the land. He tells them to come back with some good information: What are the people like? Do they live in cities? Does it look like they have a good defense system?

The men go off on their mission. When they return the spies present a good news / bad news report. The good news is that it is a great land, as they describe it, flowing with milk and honey. This could be an ideal place to put down their roots, to build new

homes, to settle in for the next generations. It may be that the rough journey through the wilderness, with the awful food in each morning's cafeteria, was worth it.

But there's bad news. In this land which they thought had been promised to them there are a lot of people. And more than this, these people are big and strong. In fact, the spies are overwhelmed. They report: the people are giants and we are merely grasshoppers.

Five years ago when I saw professor Murray's grasshopper sculpture in our new home I laughed, because I instantly remembered this story of the spies. This story rang true for me because on that move-in day, my first day on the job at North Park, I felt like a grasshopper in the presence of giants.

There aren't too many things I can promise you about what's next in store for you after graduation, but I will tell you this: (a) I promise there will be giants ahead in your life. (b) I promise there will be days when you will feel like a grasshopper.

Now don't get too discouraged by this. Everyone seated around you knows what I'm talking about. Each faculty member knows what it's like to be a grasshopper in the land of giants. Every one of your parents has experienced being a grasshopper in the land of giants. We all know what this dynamic feels like on a deeply personal basis. Feeling like a grasshopper in the land of giants is part of the human experience.

You've been here before, of course. It wasn't that long ago that you began your studies at North Park. You still remember, I'm sure, that first course you took—that time when you felt like a grasshopper in the land of giants. That same feeling is about to return, but with a key difference—the grasshopper will be smaller and the giants larger.

Throughout my life as a grasshopper in the land of giants I've made an important discovery about faith. As important as it is that we reflect on our faith, as important as it is to bring the best of our mind and the fullness of our heart to faith, as important as it is to understand our faith, as important it is to speak of our faith, it is most important that we live our faith.

We've put a lot of questions about faith before you during your time at North Park. You'll long remember these: What is justice? Who is my neighbor? Why should I be ethical? Who is God? and many others.

Here's the most important question you should ask yourself, however; more important than all the others you've asked during your years at North Park. The most important question of faith is this: How do I live it?

To answer this question we must discern how to love as God commands us to love (John 15:12). To answer this question we must uncover what it means to bear fruit, fruit that will last (John 15:16). In answering this question we will meet the stranger we are to

welcome, the naked we are invited to clothe, and the prisoner we might visit (Matthew 25:37-38). The central question on faith is simply this: How do I live it?

Have you ever noticed how Jesus lived it? Jesus lived into his faith by laughing and crying.

Jesus laughed. He was always glad to be at parties where there was plenty to eat and drink. He loved to exaggerate to make a point—telling someone to take the huge plank out of their own eye before they attempted to remove the speck in their friend's eye. He gave his closest friends nicknames—like Rocky and Thunder-boys. Jesus liked a good laugh. Jesus liked to celebrate life.

Jesus also cried. He met many people who were ill, individuals in despair, and people grieving at the death of a loved one. On many of these occasions Jesus would heal the person, but this wasn't some kind of magic, a simple waving of a wand. No, Jesus healed by sharing in the pain. He grieved with the leper, he stood next to family members at the tomb of a close friend, and he shared his food with those who were hungry. Jesus cried. He wept. He shed tears.

And by his example Jesus taught us how to live as grasshoppers in the land of giants. When you're feeling like a grasshopper, choose to startle the world with your voice of celebration and compassion, your laughter and your tears. Spread joy. Heal pain. It's what grasshoppers are meant to do when they're in the land of giants.

We've just celebrated Easter, a time in the church year when deep sadness leads to jubilant joy. Easter represents one of those elements of the Christian faith that is not easily understood—how, after all, does someone rise from the dead? Yet we don't need to understand it, we simply need to live into it. And what it means to follow Christ, what it means to embrace his death and resurrection, what it means to live faithfully, is to laugh and cry—to see the good in life and champion it, and to see pain and sorrow in life and walk alongside—all in the name of loving God and loving neighbor.

You're prepared to do this. We've called it a life of significance and service. You can use other language to describe it, but never forget that faith is meant to be lived, and living into faith is most important when as a grasshopper you venture into the land of giants.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.