
**Baccalaureate Address
Holy Name Cathedral
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Earlier this spring, during the week stretching from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, I was at home recuperating from recent surgery. I had time on my hands, but not a great deal of energy to draw on. So I sat, and I read.

I had anticipated this might be the case, and had prepared for it before my surgery. Consequently, when I returned home from the hospital I already had a number of books stacked next to my favorite chair. I read a couple of these books, and then early in Holy Week my assistant at North Park, Karen Mears, brought by a gift to add to my stack. The gift was a recent book by Anna Quindlen titled, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*.

Quindlen's book is a short one. She writes a good story in which she reflects on life, what drives us, where our priorities ought to be, where and why we sometimes get it right and how we occasionally miss the mark in life. I read the book one morning in a single sitting. I opened the book and didn't get up from the chair or put the book down until I had read it from beginning to end.

That same afternoon I wondered what else I might read from beginning to end in a single sitting. Was there another brief book, another essay on life I might read?

Then it dawned on me, as perhaps it should have because this was Holy Week—resting between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. It dawned on me that I had never read any of the gospels in a single sitting. Why not, I wondered? If Anna Quindlen can keep my attention for this long couldn't I expect the same from Jesus?

I decided to give it a try. I started with Mark, because I knew this was the short one. The next day I took on Matthew, then Luke, and eventually John. None of this was new to me. Surely I've read each word of each gospel before. But I had never before read each gospel from beginning to end in a single sitting.

In this sacred exercise I came to know Jesus as I had not known him before. I discovered, seemingly for the first time, how simple yet profound is the teaching of Jesus. I discovered how clear is the meaning of what he spoke because he so readily used word pictures to drive home his point.

We're proud at North Park of our short and rather direct mission statement: to prepare students for lives of significance and service. These are good words—because they are few, they are short enough to be remembered easily, and they are stated with conviction, identifying that the purpose of a college education is to know how to live.

Jesus takes up this same ideal. But he does so more effectively, in my opinion, than we've been able to do in the University mission statement. Jesus' take on this ideal is more effective than ours because he paints a word picture, one we don't quickly forget. Here's what Jesus teaches about the ideal of being prepared for a life of significance and service:

In Matthew:

If you grow a healthy tree, you'll pick healthy fruit. If you grow a diseased tree, you'll pick worm-eaten fruit. The fruit tells you about the tree.

Again in Luke, with only slight variation:

You don't get wormy apples from a healthy tree, nor good apples off a diseased tree. The health of the apple tells the health of the tree.

It might be that Jesus painted this word picture because he knew Psalm 1. Here the psalmist talks about individuals who please God, who live as God desires them to live. The Psalmist writes:

They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

Let me ask you this: During your years at North park, have you ever thought of your life as an undergraduate, or as a graduate student, as a tree planted by a stream of water responsible to bear good fruit in the proper season? If I didn't know better, I might argue that the psalmist was sitting on North Park's central campus green when he (or she?) penned this psalm. People...like trees...planted by a stream of water...bearing fruit. Or was Jesus walking through the orchard of North Park when he described healthy trees and healthy fruit, diseased trees and wormy apples?

Now, in our world—a world which permits only good fruit to be sold in our grocery stores—it's something of a challenge to know bad fruit. As a rule, neither Whole Food's nor Trader Joe's, neither Dominick's nor Jewel, perhaps even neither Aldi nor Andy's, sell worms in their apples. Unless you've grown up on an orchard, or lived next to a neighbor with an apple or cherry tree in the back yard, you may never have seen worm-eaten fruit.

But college helps out with this. In college we discover bad fruit. You know the routine. You're hungry one night and go to the refrigerator in your apartment to discover what you might borrow from one of your roommates. There in the back of the frig is a clear plastic box with grapes. Your eyes light up—a good snack, low enough in calories, nothing to feel too guilty about. You grab the plastic box, snap open the lid and lift out a cluster of grapes. And then you see it—that white fuzzy stuff collecting on the bottom of the box and somehow growing from nearly every one of the grapes in your cluster. Grapes gone bad.

In college we learn to recognize bad fruit.

In my reading of the Gospels, however, what I discovered about Jesus is that he is less intent on describing bad fruit and more focused on helping us know what healthy fruit looks like.

Hear Jesus:

In Mark – “Love others as well as you love yourself.” Good fruit.

In Luke – “Here’s a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them.” Good fruit.

In Matthew – “You are here to be the salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world.” God-flavors; God-colors; good fruit.

When I recently mentioned this verse from Matthew to a friend she responded in all the simplicity of a Jesus statement: Name a color that isn’t a God-color. Name a flavor that isn’t a God-flavor.

So here we have it—pure, simple, direct, in as clear a language as we could ever expect, from the master teacher himself. If after your years at North Park you’re still just a bit vague on what it means to live with significance and in service then listen to Jesus: be a healthy tree, one that bears good fruit; run away from the possibility of being a diseased tree, one that bears worm-infested fruit.

Tomorrow is the day of your transplanting. You’ll be taken from the nursery along the stream of water where you’ve been nurtured, pruned, and have begun to bear your first fruit. You’ll be transplanted to another park, nearby for some, at a greater distance for others, where we expect you’ll blossom and bloom, bearing fruit infused with the wonder of God-flavoring and shining brightly as you reflect the many God-colors of this world.

Now be transplanted, let your roots grow deep, then live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

Amen.